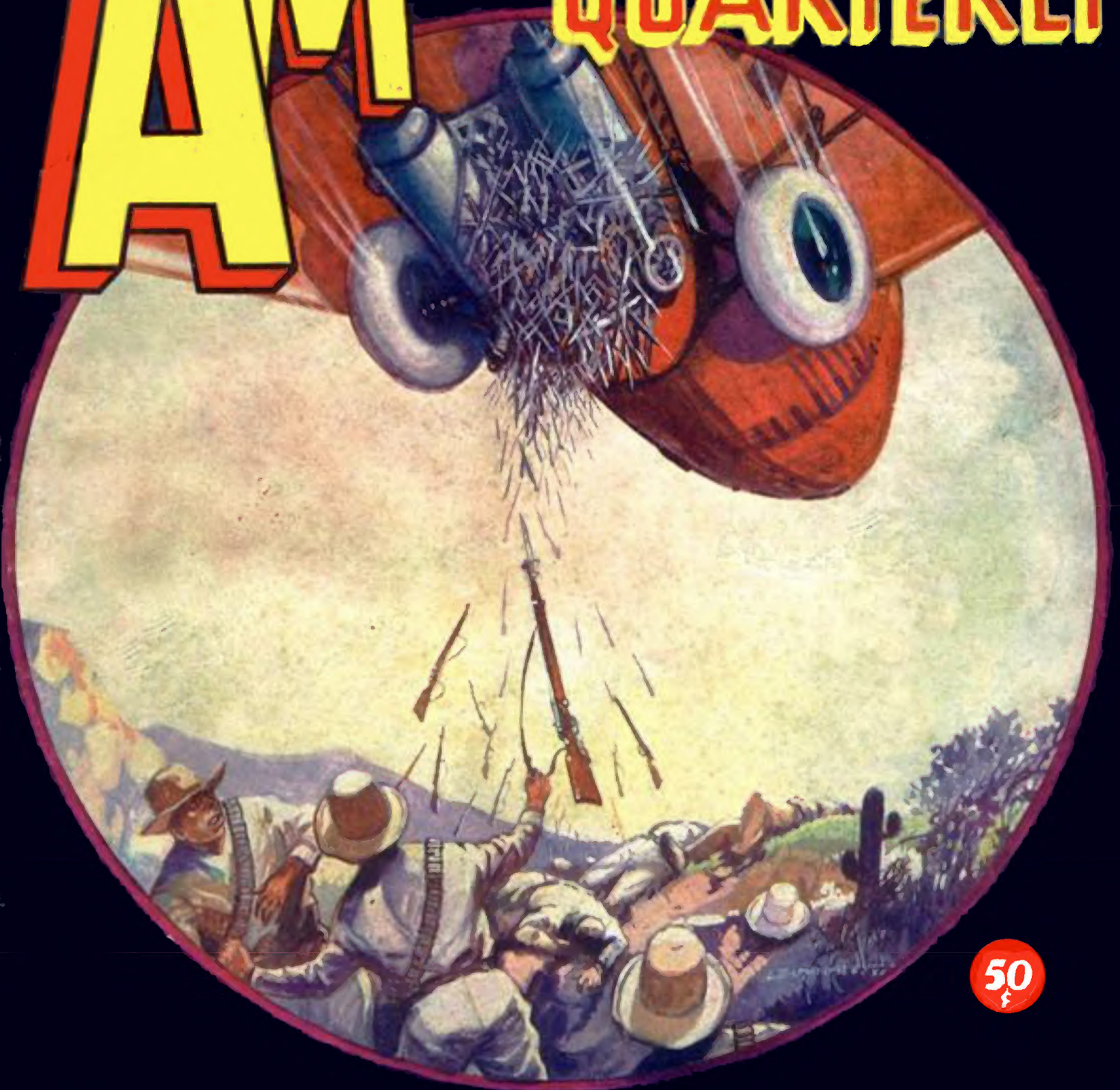
AMAZING STORIES

FALL-WINTER EDITION

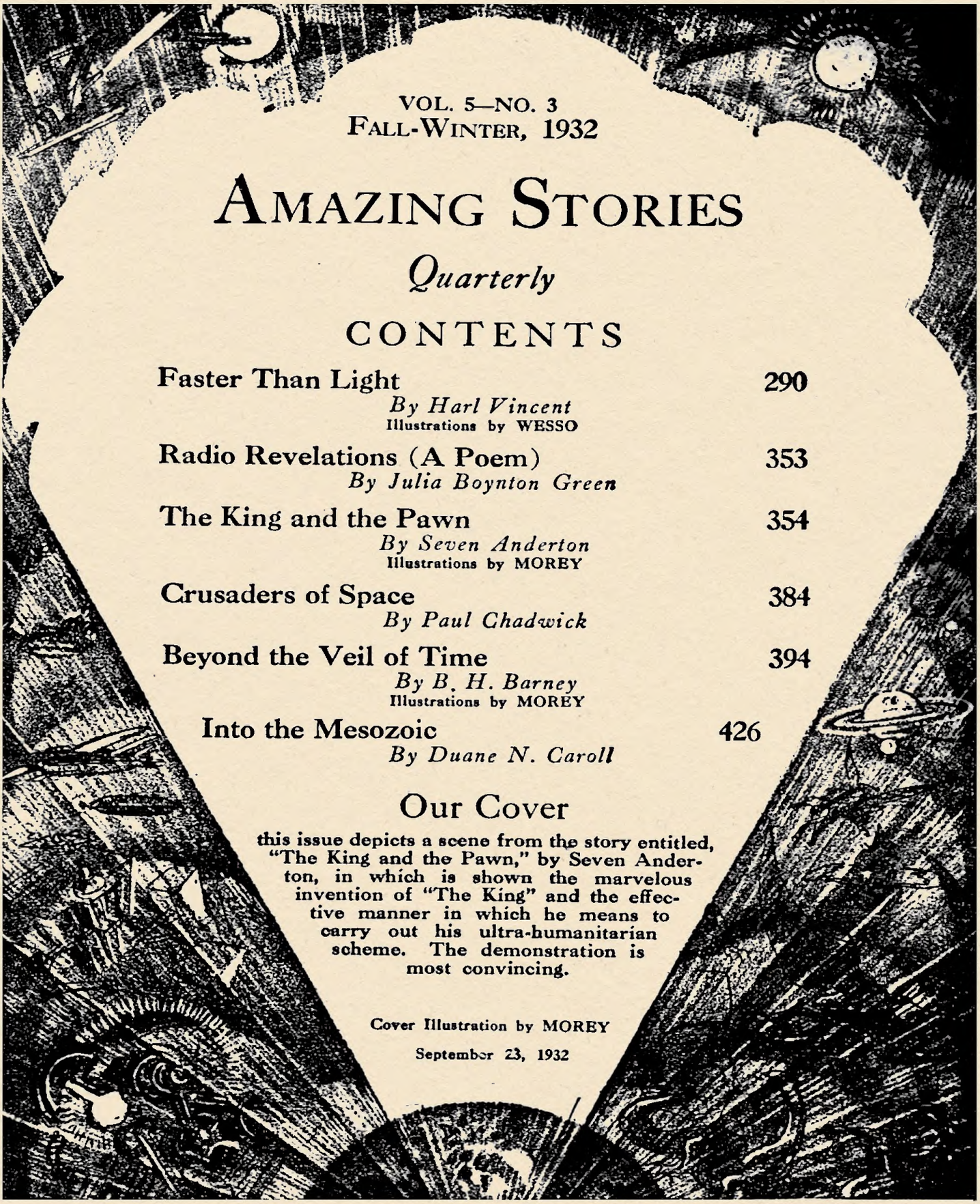
QUARTERLY



50¢

Science Fiction Stories by:

Harl Vincent **Seven Anderton** **B. H. Barney**



VOL. 5—NO. 3
FALL-WINTER, 1932

AMAZING STORIES

Quarterly

CONTENTS

Faster Than Light 290
By Harl Vincent
Illustrations by WESSO

Radio Revelations (A Poem) 353
By Julia Boynton Green

The King and the Pawn 354
By Seven Anderton
Illustrations by MOREY

Crusaders of Space 384
By Paul Chadwick

Beyond the Veil of Time 394
By B. H. Barney
Illustrations by MOREY

Into the Mesozoic 426
By Duane N. Caroll

Our Cover

this issue depicts a scene from the story entitled, "The King and the Pawn," by Seven Anderton, in which is shown the marvelous invention of "The King" and the effective manner in which he means to carry out his ultra-humanitarian scheme. The demonstration is most convincing.

Cover Illustration by MOREY

September 23, 1932

Published Quarterly by Teck Publications, Inc., *Washington and South Avennues, Dunellen, N. J.*

OFFICERS

Lee Ellmaker, *President*
Warren F. Jeffery, *Vice President*
Huston D. Crippen, *Vice President*
P. B. Diffenderfer, *Treasurer*
Abner Germana, *Secretary*

EDITORIAL AND EXECUTIVE OFFICES
222 WEST 39TH STREET, NEW YORK CITY, N. Y.

Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Dunellen, N. J., under the act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1932, by Teck Publishing Corporation. All rights reserved. Title Registered at the U. S. Patent Office. Printed in the United States of America. The contents of this magazine must not be reproduced without permission. We cannot be responsible for lost manuscripts, although every care is taken for their safety.

50c a Copy, $2.00 a year, $3.00 in Canada, and $2.50 in Foreign Countries. Subscribers are notified that change of address must reach us five weeks in advance of the next date of issue.

Beyond the Veil of Time

By B. H. Barney

CONJURERS in magic and performers of miracles really do some of the apparently impossible things they claim. What they don't divulge, however, is the fact that science plays a great part in their sleight-of-hand tricks. One well-known magician undertook on several occasions—and succeeded—to duplicate any phenomenon shown by mediums, spiritualists, et al. What a furore some magician could create in some backward country! And perhaps that is the way some savage religions are born.

Illustrated by MOREY

IN the lonely fastnesses of the Peruvian Andes came to me the first half-thought that grew into the idea which, in its own frightful fashion, threw wide the gates to the strange road that led to the mighty walls of Amnester, the Sacred City, and on to the unthinkable caverns of the Golden Mountain, within whose depths reared the terrible Altar of that dread mystery, "The Flame"; where sat the Lord of Life and the Lord of Death, enthroned among the Dreammakers, gazing ever into the fathomless pit where writhed the Serpent, guardian of the Altar.

First and foremost I am a mathematician, and I have always considered mathematics my serious life-work. However, like most of my ilk, I have a penchant for meddling in other branches of science. I take an active interest in botany and zoology, but my pet hobby is archæology. I have always been greatly interested in the storied Inca races of South America, and I have spent many enjoyable vacations exploring the ruins which stand eternal monument to the industry and engineering skill of this once great people, whose tragic decline forms a sad but attractive chapter in history.

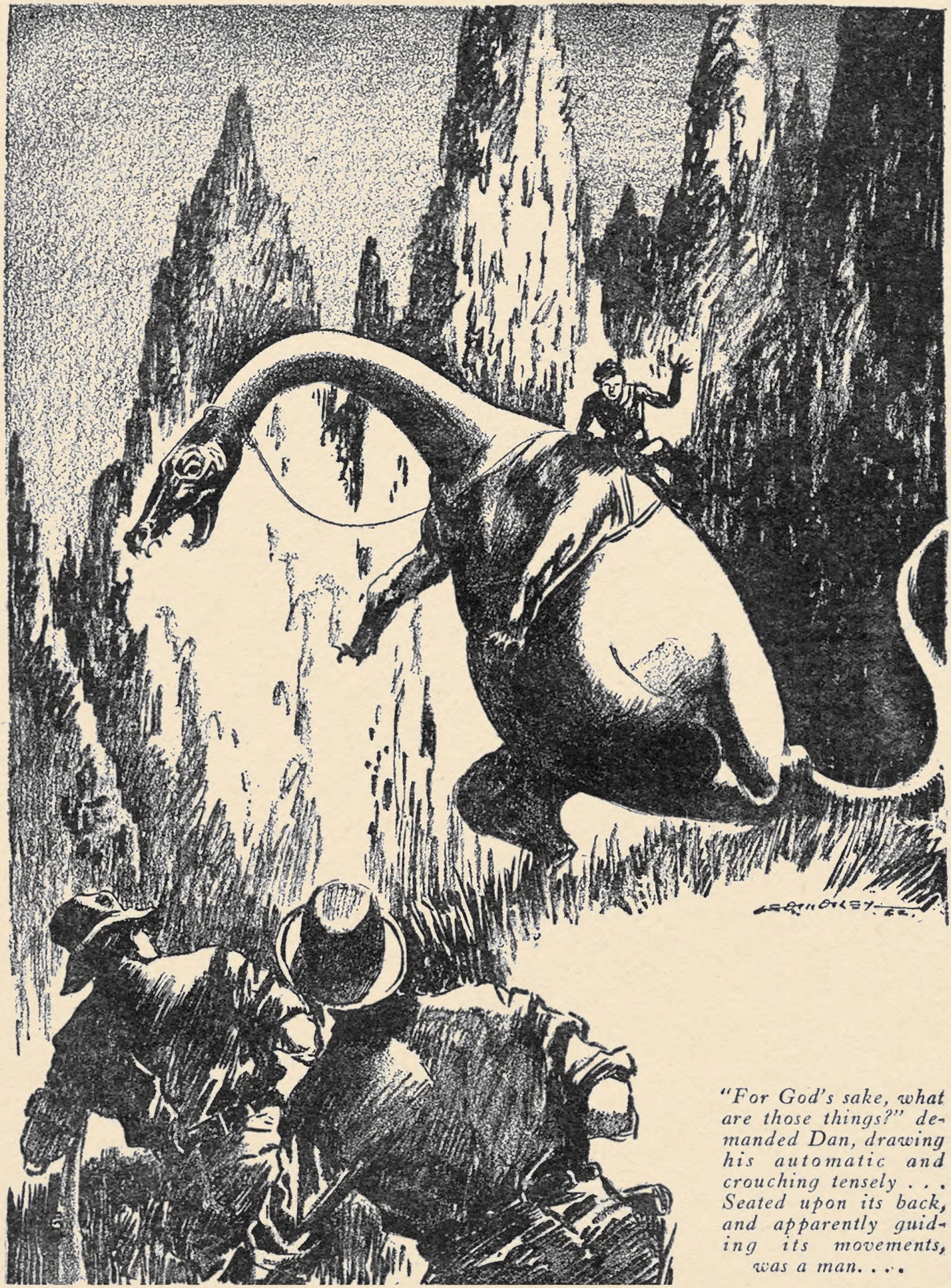
While conducting some research work along the shores of Lake Titicaca, I had acquired information which set me out on a wild journey to discover a fabled ruined city in the Andean fastness to the north-east; ruins which, it was said, no white man had ever visited.

However, I had about reached the conclusion that I was the victim of a yarn intended to entertain credulous strangers, for with my Indian guides I had been prowling gloomy canyons and cloud-high passes for weeks with no other results than frostbite and incipient snow blindness. My decision had been to give orders to backtrack for Cuzco the following day, when in a mountain-walled valley, little more than a fertile gorge, we discovered a tribe of mountain Trigullos.

The Trigullos are the direct descendants of the old Incas, and this tribe is, I believe, of the purest blood, untainted by inter-racial breeding.

I had arrived at an opportune time, for the natives were suffering from a malignant form of influenza that was killing them like flies. In my medical kit was a goodly supply of nitroglycerin, strychnine and morphine tablets, also a small quantity of camphorated oil in hermetically sealed tubes—preparations for just such an emergency, pneumonia and kindred diseases being a scourge in these regions. By hard work and judicious use of the drugs, I was able to check the epidemic and save a number of sufferers who had been given up for dying. By so doing, I earned the eternal gratitude of the tribe.

I soon found that in these Trigullos I had discovered a mine of interesting information in the form of curious legends and beliefs which, I felt, completely justified my arduous trip. I explained to my new friends the object of my journey into their country, but my mention of a ruined city was met by a singular silence. I had about given up hope of learning anything that might prove or disprove the legend and had decided to set out on the return journey. Seated in my



"For God's sake, what are those things?" demanded Dan, drawing his automatic and crouching tensely . . . Seated upon its back, and apparently guiding its movements, was a man. . . .

shelter tent I was tabulating and checking notes when the flap was raised and, out of the silvered velvet of the night, strode Huayan, Chief of the tribe.

He was one of the finest appearing natives I have ever seen, more than six feet tall, straight as an arrow and graceful as a willow wand. He was fair for an Indian, being little darker than myself, bronzed as I am by years of outdoor life. Taking him all in all, I could easily believe his claim to direct descent from Manco Capac, first king of the Incas and founder of Cuzco. At my gesture of invitation, he seated himself and spoke.

"Oh, Father of Wisdom"—the title which the Trigullos had bestowed upon me—he began in Aimara, the sacred language of the priests. "Who, unlike the other men of your race, seeks not the Tears of the Sun (gold) but only knowledge, to you I will disclose that which has not been revealed since time upon time before Manco Capac tore from the granite breast of Father Andes the first stone of the Holy City. Tomorrow I will lead the way to the ruins of a city which was old when Manco Capac and Mamao Ollo came down from the heavens to found the Inca race, which saw the Army of the Heavens (the stars) take their places one by one, and whose people have vanished long ages ago.

"Question me not, Father of Wisdom, rest and make ready: tomorrow I point the way."

CHAPTER II

The Whispering Gorge

IN the gray light of dawn we started, Huayan leading the way, a small body of picked warriors following. My own guides he would not permit to accompany us, so they remained behind in the valley, and well content to do so, I think.

Just as we reached the summit of a peak, the golden rim of the sun pushed over the Andean wall and as the Indians stretched forth their arms and chanted a song of greeting, into my mind crept the reply of Atahualpa, last king of the Incas, to the Christian priest: "Your God was put to death by the men to whom he brought life; but mine still lives in the heavens and shines upon his children."

For three days we traversed such a region as it had never before been my bad luck to encounter; trails where it seemed possible to step off to the clouds; ways that hugged beetling precipices on one side with a sheer drop of thousands of feet on the other; sky-high passes where the rarefied air made physical effort exhausting, where glittering snow fields blinded and the winds ate into one's very bones.

On the fourth day we began to descend, and by noon we were at an elevation of less than seven thousand feet, threading our way through a gloomy canyon whose towering walls formed little more than a channel for a foaming stream that rushed onward with a surge and sweep of hissing black water. Between stream and wall was a path hewed in the living rock, a path barely wide enough for us to creep along like flies on a ledge.

"Patience," spoke Huayan in a low voice as I forged ahead to his side, "only a little farther."

A few hundred yards of scrambling and slipping, then around a bulging curve we crept out of the gloom of the gorge into a flood of sunshine.

At first I was blinded by the sudden radiance, then, as my eyes became accustomed to the glare, I paused in amazement. Truly here was enough to astonish any explorer.

We stood upon a flat stone platform roughly rectangular in shape, a hundred yards wide by twice that in length, the sides breaking off abruptly in jumbled masses of stone, as if some convulsion of nature had flung this tiny plateau up from the surrounding level. In front, the descent was more gradual and a semblance of a trail led to the valley floor. This valley was walled by towering mountains and we eventually found that it was about ten miles in width by thirty in length. Park-like forests dotted it; the stream, which turned from the gorge at a sharp angle to dash foaming down the side of the platform, ran a silver ribbon set in banks of emerald. At the foot of the valley reared a mighty peak in lone and awful majesty, its rounded summit glittering with snow; and far down the valley, full twenty miles distant but seeming nearer in the clear air, were shadowy ruined walls. It was the fabled city which I had sought.

Beautiful and peaceful was this walled valley, but, as I gazed, a coldness crept about my heart, and I shivered in the warm sunlight. A nameless menace seemed to hang over this shut-in place, a vague threat, a misty, unseen *presence* of evil.

The deep voice of Huayan broke upon my reverie.

"Here, Father of Wisdom, was a city whose people lived and loved and died. Here wisdom grew and flourished, and with it evil, a dread and terrible evil that fed upon the souls of men, waxing ever greater, until one came from out the veil of time and vanquished it for a space; but the Presence still abides in this place, and none may encroach upon that Presence.

"Come, we will descend to the trees and make a fire so that we may eat, for the night is soon upon us. In the morning, we will leave this place, lest evil befall."

"But, Huayan," I expostulated, "I desire to examine those ruins."

"My friend," he replied, "I have spoken; the season of the storm is at hand and my people murmur. Soon the passes which we traveled will be blocked with snow, and this valley will be a place of death. Return with me on the morrow and when the sun of a new year warms the breast of Father Andes, come again and Huayan will guide you hither."

With this I was forced to be content.

One final episode of this eventful day impressed me greatly. We had reached the edge of the plateau when the rays of the setting sun struck full upon the summit of the great snow mountain which barred the far end of the valley. With magical suddenness the vast snow fields changed from pearly white to shimmering gold, a scene beautiful and awesome beyond description.

The effect on the Trigullos was remarkable. With the exception of Huayan, they prostrated themselves and lay motionless. The Chief drew himself up to the full of his stately height and began a strange wild chant in Aimara.

I had always prided myself in my knowledge of the sacred language, but this invocation left me groping in a maze of unfamiliar words; only dimly could I sense the meaning of the whole.

It was old—old with an ancientness that smote the listener with a vision of earth youngness, of newly-created peoples counting the stars as they blossomed in the black vault of the heavens, building and achieving in the light of newborn suns, dreaming dreams of youth, watching the fresh-turned leaves of eternity glow with the inscribed records of worlds just made. It was the anthem of a people groping in darkness but straining toward the light and finding it good.

That night we feasted on the flesh of a small deer that I bagged in the growth along the stream. We were sitting close to the warmth of the roaring fire, for there was a crisp chill in the air. In the velvet sky the great glowing stars seemed to brush the mountain summits and the valley glowed with a silvery radiance. Such wild and savage beauty I had never before seen

in all my wanderings, and my throat ached with the poignancy of it.

I did not sleep well, tired though I was; grotesque dreams haunted me and peopled the darkness with vague and terrible shapes. The threatening evil seemed to pierce the veil of unconsciousness and chill me with foreboding. Nor did my companions fare hetter, and we were early astir, although it was imperative to wait until well after sunrise hefore entering the black mouth of that eerily whispering gorge that was the gateway to this place.

While standing on the stone platform, watching the vague ruins emerge from the morning mists, there came to me the first faint glimmering of the idea which sent me back to civilization with a definitely formed plan for piercing the veil of mystery which hung miasmatically over these shadowy relics of a forgotten people.

CHAPTER III

"The Gypsy Trail"

BACK again in my lahoratory I calculated, derived formulas and builded until my strange creation was complete.

In this age of radio nearly everyone has some knowledge of the theory of vihrations and have heard of the contention advanced hy many scientists that the vihratory impulses of all sounds are registered indelibly, and, if the proper apparatus be assembled, could be called back in their original form.

I merely went a step farther and worked on the theory that all motion is recorded in like manner and can be recalled and reproduced in much the same manner as the moving picture is thrown upon the screen. I proved mathematically the contention to my own satisfaction and constructed a machine that I was confident would bring about the desired results.

It was natural to suppose that success could be best obtained where solitude and little movement had been the rule for an extended period of time, so I considered the lonely, mountain-ringed valley, which had so interested me, an ideal locality for the experiment.

The sun was warming the mountains, when I again faced north-east from the mighty walls of Cuzco. I was accompanied hy an escort of native guides and a train of pack mules loaded with supplies for several months' stay in the mountains. They also carried the carefully packed parts of my invention.

Our first objective was Huayan's village, and with unerring instinct my guide led the way through the tangled maze of mountains, which we had traversed many months before. We were about a day's journey from the rendezvous and were seeking a suitahle place to camp for the night when, as we scrambled down a steeply winding hit of trail, the tang of wood smoke stung our nostrils and to our ears came the sound of singing:

> Back to the road again, again,
> Out of a clear sea track
> Follow the cross of the Gypsy Trail,
> Over the world and back.

Now who on earth could he singing "The Gypsy Trail" in this wild solitude? And singing it in a cultured voice of uncommon depth and sweetness!

Around a bend in the trail we swung to where a little clump of woodland bordered a tinkling, crystal-clear stream. Close to this stream a fire burned brightly, and beside the fire a man was busy with frying pan and coffee pot. At the sound of our approach he quickly stood erect and I caught the lightning flicker of a hand to the big service automatic hung low on his right thigh. A swiftly appraising glance, the hand dropped and a quizzical smile curved the lips and hrightened the steady gray eyes.

"Come on to supper," he called in a hearty voice, "coffee's just hoiled!"

There was real welcome in the invitation and that smile was infectious; so with a word of directions to my Indians to pitch camp nearby, I walked over to the fire.

"I am Dr. Richard Nelson," I introduced myself, "and I am heartily glad to meet up with a white man in these hills."

"Dr. Nelson!" he exclaimed, "not hy any chance Dr. Nelson the mathematician and consulting engineer?"

"Well," I smiled, "I helieve I have some slight reputation along those lines."

"By George, this is wonderful!" he cried, shaking my hand in a steely grip. "Your paper that was read before the last meeting of the Mathematical Society interested me greatly. But I'm forgetting myself. I am Dan Bradford, originally from Virginia, now from most anywhere, sometlmes clvil engineer, at present amateur gold hunter and seeker after the-thing-that's-just-over-the-next-hilltop.

"Sit down, Doctor"—hauling out a rasher of bacon and busily slicing off strips—"you must eat supper with me while your men are pitching camp. This bacon is prime, there's johnny-cake baking under the ashes—you know we make *real* johnny-cake in Vlrginia—and the coffee is strong enough to walk away. I want to hear first-hand your explanatlon of that theory of groups."

So it was that I met Dan Bradford of Virginia—Dan Bradford with his voice of an angel, his soul of a leprechaun and his courage unafraid. One of those bright spirits that follow the dlm trails with a smile for Fate, a laugh for Love, and a jest for the teeth of Death!

We talked until far into the night, and I realized a growing liking for this tuneful wanderer, who was as familiar with a hundred out-of-the-way places of the world as he was with the works of celehrated mathematicians.

"Finished putting in a bridge down in the valley a month ago," he stated laconically. "Decided I'd worked long enough for a spell and thought I'd try a little prospecting in these hills. They always did interest me; many's the time I've gazed up at these gray old fellows and wondered what was hidden hehind them. And as the shadows would come creeping up the slopes at evening, seem's they'd whisper, 'Come and see! Come and see!' So here I am, on the trail to nowhere again.

"I was horn in Virginia, took my degree at the University; huilt a few bridges and things in various parts of the world, did a little mining, served with the Escadrille and won my wings during the war, and came through without a scratch. Just turned thirty and haven't a thing in the world to worry about."

In turn I explained the ohject of my own mission and what I hoped to accomplish. He was enthusiastic, for the thing appealed to his romantic nature, and he expressed a decided belief in the feasihillty of the project.

The upshot of the matter was that I invited him to joln me. He accepted my invitation after only a moment's pondering.

"Strange how our preconceived ideas of people and things are shattered hy actuality," he continued in a musing voice. "I've always pictured Dr. Nelson as a little wizened old fellow, who spent most of his time around mahogany-furnished consulting offices or poring over ponderous mathematical works. I certainly did

not expect to find him a black-bearded giant with the arms and shoulders of a prize fighter, and not much older than myself."

"Well, Dan," I laughed—he had insisted that I address him thus—"I do not generally wear the beard; it is a concession to frostbite and these infernal winds. I was an athlete during my college days, and ripping up old ruins in various inaccessible parts of the world does not tend to fatty degeneration—that may account for the arms. As I lack a couple of years of being forty, I am hardly due to be wizened for a while, at least."

Late the next evening, we reached the village and were warmly welcomed by the Trigullos, who are a friendly, hospitable people, although possessed of a dignity in their dealings with strangers that is often mistaken for coldness.

I presented Dan to Huayan who acknowledged the introduction with grave politeness; and when the bronzed Virginian and the stately leader stood face to face, I thought I had never before seen two finer appearing men.

In height they were identical; steady gray eyes gazed straight into piercing black; the dark mane of the chieftain was not more luxuriant than the clustered locks of the engineer, which curled over his finely shaped head like those of some old statue. The features of each were regular and clean cut.

The hand of the Indian swept up in a strange salute and he nodded gravely to me.

"You choose well, Father of Wisdom. Here is one worthy to wear the plumes of the caraquenques."

With difficulty I repressed an exclamation of astonishment: only a student of Inca customs and beliefs could appreciate the greatness of the compliment. For the caraquenques were those mystic birds which, say the Incas, were but two in all time and on all the earth, which appeared at the coronation of each new king and gave him two of their feathers to adorn his head-dress.

CHAPTER IV

The Face in the Flame

THE rays of the setting sun were making a golden glory of the snow fields on the mountain crest when we emerged from a final clump of woodland and paused a few hundred feet from the outer wall of the city.

Mighty, broken, gray with age, it towered more than fifty feet in height and full thirty in width, stretching across the valley as far as the eye could reach, a rampart of great squared blocks, sinister, menacing.

Ancient, ancient beyond belief was this stupendous creation of a vanished people. I have stood within the Pyramid at Gizeh and felt the impression of vast age exude and press upon me like a tangible force; but it was as nothing compared to that which hung over these frowning battlements. The dark eyes of Huayan burned like coals as he gazed upon the bleak surface glowing redly in the last rays of the sun, while Dan crooned softly one of his weird lyric legends, as was his wont when greatly moved by something.

The Indians had helped us to establish our camp and build a comfortable shack on the little stone platform by the mouth of the gorge; then they had departed with the mules, promising to return at the end of two months, leaving the three of us to ferret out the mysteries of this haunted place as best we could.

It was too late to attempt any exploration of the ruins that night, so we camped in the shadow of the wall. There was a chill about us that was not of the high altitudes. Into our hearts crept a coldness that the leaping flames of the fire could not drive out. The shadowy, undefinable phantasm of evil hung over us as a presence and though we laughed at the suggestion, we could not cast it off.

The next morning we passed through the ancient gateway set in its broken cyclopean pillars and entered the silent streets. The stone flags rang beneath our feet, the echoes whispering eerily from mighty buttress and overhanging projections and running murmuringly along vast squared walls built with a mathematical precision and a massiveness that spoke volumes for the skill of the long dead engineers who planned and constructed them.

Old, old was the city, built on a scale of magnificence that dwarfed the spacious structures of the Incas; for plain it was, that this was no monument to the genius of the descendants of Manco Capac. The architecture was different, was far more beautiful: exquisite carvings graced the walls, murals of hunting scenes, of battles in which men rode huge, grotesque monsters. Great was my astonishment, upon examining these carvings more closely, to find an uncanny similarity between the sculptured creatures and the reconstructed likenesses of the prehistoric herbivorous dinosaur, the iguanodon. Here was mystery indeed. Had these ancient people a knowledge of geology that would compare favorably with that of the present age? And why had they placed figures of men astride those of creatures vanished from the earth before the advent of man? Perhaps the imagery of some weird religious belief; perhaps but the whim of a great artist, who was privileged to do as he pleased.

The gigantic proportions of the structures astounded us. Here were temples greater than the House of the Serpent in Cuzco; fortresses before which the tremendous Sacsay-Huaynam shrank to insignificance: on all sides were relics of departed grandeur in an iron-hard stone that had defied the ravages of time for untold ages.

In vain I looked for sculptured representation of the sun; this symbol, omnipresent throughout the cities of the Incas, was nowhere apparent.

Across the faces of many of the temples weaved strange carvings, grotesque figures as are found in the Javan pantheon, nightmare conceptions of evil. Graven on a broad, low slab between the stately columns of a colossal temple we found—*The Face.*

Strangely beautiful it was, a masterpiece in stone, and yet with a sinisterness that smote the heart as if it were something dread and unclean. A face emerging from a living flame. Emerging, but in some indefinable way incorporated, insomorphous with flame, and beautiful as flame is beautiful—a fearful, fascinating beauty.

I moved closer to better examine this wonderful example of the sculptor's art, and as I leaned forward, from the fretted surface of the slab reared a grisly, spotted shape. I heard Dan's cry of warning, and as I recoiled from the deadly menace, sensed that lightning flicker of his hand, that I had noted at the mountain camp. A streak of flame leaped from his side, a sharp report shattered the stillness and at my feet writhed the headless body of a short, thick snake with markings unlike those of any species with which I was familiar.

"A narrow escape, oh Wise One," spoke the deep voice of Huayan as he gazed at the twitching shape; "here was death in a dreadful form."

"How is it named, Huayan?" I queried. "I have never beheld its like."

"It is the Guardian Serpent of The Flame," he answered. Then, his eyes brooding, dream-filled: "Even thus, sayeth the legend, perished the evil of The Flame, stricken down in its might even while attempting further evil."

"Well," I said with feeling, "no matter how the thing

is named, I guess I owe my life to you, Dan. That was one of the finest shots I ever saw."

The engineer flushed at my words and waved a deprecatory hand.

"All luck, Doc, I had to take a chance, and things broke for us, that's all. I don't like snakes, anyway. Let's look around and see if there's any more of 'em."

We investigated closely, but unearthed no more of the reptiles, so, after examining the strange carving, we moved on.

Everywhere we found the beautiful symbol of evil, but were fortunate to encounter no more of the deadly guardians.

The next day we returned to the plateau, and for several weeks Dan and I labored diligently at assembling the machine, the Chief hunting and fishing to replenish the larder.

CHAPTER V

The Girl of the Luminous Curtain

FINALLY all was ready, and I decided, weather permitting, to make the attempt the following noon. A clear sky was essential, for I relied on sun-heat to furnish the required power for operating the machine.

Through an opening in the cabin porch roof rose a funnel-shaped pipe, set with carefully arranged reflectors and lenses which would gather the rays and concentrate them on the heat motors below. The outer end of the funnel was provided with a lever-operated slide which regulated the admittance of the rays and governed the activity of the machine.

The fateful day dawned clear and noon found the sun's rays pouring from a cloudless sky when I took my place beside the strange creation of shining wheels and drums with its flaring projector pointing toward the distant ruins that glowed redly in the sunlight.

That morning we had all taken part in an expedition to bag a mountain lion, whose lair Huayan had discovered the day before. Due to this fact we were wearing our cartridge belts, heavy service automatics and hunting knives, having neglected to remove them in our eagerness to take advantage of the directly overhead sun.

Thus, to an inconsequential bit of sport, we doubtlessly owed our lives during the amazing adventures that followed.

It was with some misgivings that I grasped the controlling lever as the sun neared the zenith. Forces had gone into the making of this thing that even I did not thoroughly understand, and I was not positive that I could control them once they were loosed. I had outlined the situation in its entirety the night before, and my companions were unanimous that the chance be taken. The Virginian with his carefree, devil-may-care nature was ready for anything, just so it promised excitement; while of late the Chief seemed to live in some rarefied atmosphere of "prophecy-to-be-fulfilled" and appeared positive that whatever happened must be for the best. So without further hesitation I pulled the lever, uncovering the aperture about half way. This would be sufficient, I judged, to admit light rays enough to generate the required power.

Slowly the glistening wheels and bell-shaped drums began to revolve. A faint hum became apparent, rapidly increasing in volume; not loud, but with a piercing, vibratory quality that seemed to eat into the very bones.

From the projector streamed a cloud of tiny, dancing particles: sunbeam motes they seemed to be, flashing, sparkling, ever increasing in number. They filled the air, blotting out the valley, mountains and distant ruins. Came a faint sighing, a mournful whisper that shuddered about us, lifting and wafting over the deep, vibrating hum that was shaking the very earth. The cloud of light-particles shifted, trembled and receded, forming a vast polychromatic curtain stretched across the valley. Louder and louder grew the mournful sighing. The curtain brightened, shimmering tentacles of light played across its surface, coruscating spirals weaving back and forth, lambent tongues, flaring, writhing, scintillating with an unearthly radiance. Splendrous pools of ghostly luminosity, like unto curdled moonbeams, formed in the nitid depths and across them flickered mighty shadows vast as the wings of Israfel, which are so wide, say the Arabs, that the world can cower beneath them like a nestling. Floods of opalescence gushed forth, pulsing streams, swirling, coiling, spraying ruby and emerald drops of living fire.

A feeling of mighty exultation seized upon us, lifting, exalting. We were gods rushing amongst the stars, drenched in the light of new-born suns, hurtling creations through the immensities of interstellar space. The brain reeled from the effect of it. It was spiritual intoxication.

Brighter and brighter glowed the curtain, a vast sheet of lambent flame shot with intense rainbows of sparkling, pulsing light. Plumes of radiance raced across it, interlacing, weaving, flaring out in dazzling beams of varicolored lightning. The mournful sighing grew in volume, changed to a rushing roar. The luminous curtain blazed and flamed, grew, filled the heavens! Before it formed a vague whirling of shadows, rushing, rushing, streaming ever onward. It grew, the shrouding light-mists swept away and revealed it—a country of marl extending forever.

"What is it?" gasped Dan. "The primal whirl of the cosmos?"

"I don't know," I whispered, "but I do know we can't stand much more of this. I'll have to shut the thing off."

My brain was reeling as I spoke and my limbs shook as with palsy. I knew I could not keep a grip on consciousness much longer, and the others were in as bad shape. Dan's face was chalky white, and the pupils of his eyes were dilated enormously, while the Chief was clinging to a stanchion and looking more like a dead Trigullo than a live one.

"Just a minute longer, Doc," croaked Dan; Huayan nodded feeble agreement.

Across the face of the curtain began to weave vague, unnameable shapes. Ghostly edifices formed, dissipated and ceased to be. Figures dimly moved and were swallowed up. In the sparkling depths a shape formed, grew, brightened! The shrouding light-mists swept away and revealed the figure of a girl—a girl whose great black eyes were as gold-flecked pools of liquid light, whose hair was the misted night of the storm-cloud, whose lips were as red as the royal coral. From white, tenderly rounded breasts, to dainty high-arched feet she was swathed in a filmy, clinging robe that naively revealed the sweet curves of her body. Entwined in the shadowy masses of her hair was a wreath of blooms, white with the whiteness of moon-flame.

Beautiful, beautiful beyond words was that flower-like face framed in the swirling, opalescent flame.

On Dan's countenance was the look of one who after untold ages sees at last his heart's desire. Nor did it seem strange to me. This was as it should be, I vaguely thought.

The radiance wreathed about the figure, the glorious eyes grew dreamy, a smile curved the tender lips as the long, graceful hands fluttered upward. Then suddenly the eyes darkened and widened, a fleeting expres-

sion of terror filmed the exquisite features. The light-mists, pulsed, rolled and blotted out the vision.

The roar of the cosmos grew in volume, the vast reaches of the marl rushed past faster and faster, the soul-shaking hum deepened. Dan turned a ghastly face to me; a contortion of a smile twisted his lips—"Wasn't she a wonder, Doc? What scared her?"—and slumped gently forward on his face.

I glanced at Huayan. He was stretched flat on the rough floor, unconscious. Blindly, I reached for the lever; my groping fingers searched, faltered, closed upon it, and as my knees buckled under me—*pulled!*

Instantly the piercing hum rose to a scream; the roar of the cosmos filled all space and shook the worlds. The curtain writhed, shook, split asunder! An all-engulfing blaze of dazzling white light! A crash, the rending apart of creations! Vast rushing shadows! Blackness and oblivion.

CHAPTER VI

Across the Ages

I WAS uncomfortably warm, my head ached abominably, my eyes burned and smarted. What in the world had happened to me! This was not my bunk on which I lay. Returning memory. The luminous curtain? The machine? I had pulled the lever instead of pushing it. Must have blown the machine up. Dizzily I sat up, a wave of nausea sweeping over me. The vertigo quickly passed, and as my vision cleared I gasped in amazement.

Where was I? Gone was the shack, the machine, the plateau itself. I lay on the valley floor—or what it seemed should be the valley floor, although there was nothing in sight that in the least resembled the familiar scene on which my eyes had been accustomed to gaze for the past few weeks.

All about towered a monstrous vegetation like unto nothing I had ever seen before. I felt an amazement growing to something akin to awe: the vista was a *Fata Morgana* of plantdom. A forest of fern walled me in—fern to the unheard of height of fifty feet! Spangled over the fronds were nets of blooms and cataracts of blossoms strange in shape, pulsing, glowing, shining like jewels; a shattered rainbow cascaded in a torrent of fiery drops. I rubbed my aching head and stared, my brain reeling.

Behind me sounded a groan; my companions were regaining consciousness. Dizzily they sat up, felt of their aching heads and stared.

"Where—where are we?" muttered Dan. "Looks like Heaven; hot enough for the other place, though. What happened, Doc?"

"More than I can say," I answered, "I just woke up. Looks as if we had been transplanted to the land of the Jinn."

"Perhaps we've been unconscious or delirious for a long time and the Indians returned and carried us to the lowlands for some reason or other," he offered.

"No, that theory won't hold water; our clothes are not changed in any way. Why, even my wrist watch is still running, and it reads two o'clock—it was about twelve when we started the experiment. What do you think about it, Huayan?"

The Trigullo smiled his cryptic smile and shook his head.

"Well, let's make a move and investigate," exclaimed Dan, struggling to his feet. "Lord, I feel as if I had been pulled through a knot-hole!"

We hauled off our heavy coats and opened our shirts at the throat, for the air was hot and sultry, totally unlike the bracing climate of the high valley we had known for the past weeks. I observed that the light which filtered through the shrouding vegetation held a faintly reddish tinge.

Over a carpet of living gems we strode—flowers of a dazzling, varicolored brilliance.

"Seems to me the cliff should lie this way," said Dan. "The ground slopes upward, too. Perhaps we can get up to where we can get a look at things: let's go this way."

He was right. As we proceeded, the fern growth thinned, and soon we caught a glimpse of the cliff gleaming dully through the fronds.

"Good Lord!" suddenly exclaimed the engineer. "Look at the sun!"

Dazedly we stopped and stared. Directly overhead, through a rift in the fronds, shone the great luminary: the sun, yet strangely unfamiliar. Larger it seemed and of a reddish hue, such as is given by smoke or haze. But we instinctively felt that this was not the redness of smoke nor haze; the air was crystal-clear. This ruddy tinge was of the orb itself. Dan threw his hands wide in an expressive gesture of helplessness. Words were useless.

To the base of the cliff the grade was sharp and we panted in the humid air as we clambered upward. In the shadow of the cliff we turned.

The growth obscured the valley, but far down it, towering to the rose-tinted heavens, was a mighty, truncated cone from whose summit rose a steady plume of dark smoke.

"Can that be Old Goldy?" gasped Dan.

"If it is, he has changed into a darn active volcano," I answered grimly. A solution of the mystery had gradually dawned on me—a solution so utterly preposterous that I hesitated to advance it. Instinctively I felt that Huayan knew; his bearing was of one who feels no surprise, only wonder at strange events.

"Well, Doctor, what's the answer?" queried Dan. "You're the man-o-wisdom of this outfit."

I took a long look at the distant, smoke-crowned peak before answering. Then with a deep breath I plunged in.

"There is only one solution I can give, Dan, and it will sound like the telling of a hashish dream. As I mentioned in the beginning, forces went into the making of that infernal machine that, for all my study, I did not understand. When I pulled the slide wide open instead of closing it, as I had intended, Heaven alone knows what powers I loosed.

"You know that time is the true fourth dimension upon which depends the other three: all matter has length, breadth and thickness, and in addition, something without which the other three could not exist—duration. Time is a dimension which exists just as truly as the others, although it is hard for us, unaccustomed to regard it as such, to picture time that way. We think of time as something transient, when in reality it is just as tangible and permanent as length or breadth. This is a strange place for such a dissertation, but I am trying to prepare you for my explanation. Now, if my definition of time is correct, the past and the future must exist in unison with what we term the present. Granting this statement to be correct, I have only one solution for our mystery. In some manner, we have been projected into the future or retrograded into the past, presumably the latter, as our experiment dealt with it."

Huayan nodded gravely, while Dan gave vent to a long whistle of amazement.

"Judas Priest!" he exclaimed; "then we may be alive a million years before we were born!"

"Something like that," I grinned.

For a moment the engineer looked grave, then he

gave a joyous laugh that resounded in the distance.

"This is better than I expected," he cried, a reckless light in his gray eyes. "There's no one left behind to mourn me, and from what you told me of your antecedents, Doctor, you are in a similar position. I understand that Huey, too, is a wifeless orphan. So why worry. We ought to find new things, or rather, old ones, and there should be plenty of excitement. Everything's lovely and the goose hangs high."

His gayety was infectious; I laughed outright, while the Chief smiled gravely, as was his wont when he was pleased. After all, what was there to be cast down about? Science was my god, my only love. If I never returned to our own time, there was no one to care. Already I was tingling with eagerness to examine the amazing plant life which rioted about us; and who knew what other wonders awaited our eyes. What greater good fortune could a scientist ask?

Dan was speaking again: "The most important thing right now, to my mind, is to get something to eat; I'm half starved!"

At this remark I too became conscious of an outrageous hunger, as well as an extremely disagreeable thirst.

"Let's take stock of what equipment we have and then get down into the growth and try to find the wherewithal for a square meal," I proposed.

A hurried inventory revealed in the matter of armament our automatic pistols, something over two hundred cartridges and a heavy hunting knife each. We each had a supply of tobacco, some matches, a few cigarette papers and a couple of pipes. Huayan discovered a small packet of salt in one of his pockets. In addition to his knife, Dan had slung to his belt a small guarded hatchet-axe which had proven its worth on so many occasions that he was seldom without it. I had a notebook and a fountain pen, while the engineer also possessed a pen, notebook and a couple of pencils. These things with the small pocket medical case I always carried were the extent of our equipment for this momentous journey.

"Why, we're rich!" exclaimed Dan. "Just think, if we hadn't been wearing our guns! Blessings on that tomcat of yours, Huey, even if we didn't get a shot at him. Come on, boys, let's hit the jungle."

Without more ado we plunged into the monstrous fern growth, treading the varicolored carpet of flowers, while all about us swooped gorgeous butterflies and tiny, brilliant-plumaged birds.

I noticed that while all colors of flowers prevailed, white and yellow predominated, and white and yellow are the primal flower colors. Here was something which, combined with that strange reddish sun, hinted that we had been cast untold ages into the past. I pondered this matter as we walked along. What animal life we should encounter was problematical, but it might be of an extremely formidable nature. I remarked as much to my companions and we agreed that a close watch on our surroundings at all times was imperative.

We were suffering greatly from thirst and the sound of running water was most welcome to our ears after we had walked some distance from the cliff base. We were rapidly approaching the stream, when Dan, who was a little in advance, suddenly halted and held up his hand in a warning gesture. We crept cautiously forward in obedience to his beckoning and crouched beside him, peering through the screening fronds in amazement.

Directly in front of us was a clearing stretching to the banks of a small stream. Upon the grass and flowers, which carpeted this tiny glade, fed three creatures. Plainly they were deer, but such deer! Larger than the largest elk, they were snow white in color except their tails, which were black. Two were does, while the third was a stately male with superb branching antlers. It was a wonderful and beautiful sight and for a long time we gazed, loath to spoil the picture.

"It's a shame to shoot them," whispered Dan, "but we've got to eat. Both together, Doc; we'll take the doe on the left."

At the sharp crack of the automatics, the great male and one of the does crashed madly through the growth in headlong flight, but the other leaped convulsively once and crumpled to earth.

Exultantly we ran to the slaughtered beast, and very soon a delectable haunch of venison was cooling in the surprisingly cold waters of the stream while three hungry adventurers gathered dried fern fronds for a fire.

The shadows were lengthening as we prepared our meal, and soon darkness fell with tropical suddenness. Never had I enjoyed a supper as I did this one; the journey across the ages, however it was accomplished, had left us famished and we did ample justice to the steaks of the unfortunate deer.

We cooked a quantity of the flesh after we had satisfied our appetites, for it was apparent that raw meat would not keep long in this climate, and we did not know when we would be fortunate enough to make another kill. Splashes in the stream from time to time denoted fish of some nature, which advanced hopes for a replenishment of our larder from this source if others failed.

CHAPTER VII

A Visitor

WE decided to divide the night into watches, for we did not know what dangers might not menace us in this land of vegetative monstrosities, that could produce such deer as the creature we had slain.

I elected to stand first trick and seated myself comfortably beside the fire which I replenished from time to time with stout chunks cut from the dried bases of the ferns. My companions flung themselves on beds of fronds and immediately slept the sleep of exhausted men.

The moonless night was silent save for occasional splashings in the stream and now and then a weird bird-cry from the depths of the growth.

I was dog-tired and it was with difficulty that I kept my eyes from closing as the minutes dragged slowly by. The events of the past twelve hours streamed through my mind in grotesque panorama and I found it impossible to think consecutively concerning them. What forces had I loosed when I pulled the slide wide open? How had we made the unbelievable transition across the gulf that separates the past from the present? Who and what was the girl who had appeared so weirdly upon the luminous curtain? Thinking on the sweet beauty of her and Dan's look as he gazed upon her loveliness, I hoped that we had been cast into the age in which she had her being. And why not? It must have been that particular period of time with which the machine had been dealing when the cataclysm had occurred. Perhaps we should find her after all. If we did, what would be our reception from the race that she represented?

Then again we may have been cast into some tremendously remote eon, prior to man's appearance on the globe. In truth, what we had seen and experienced gravely suggested the probability of this: that fiery sun; the gigantic growth of fern; the great preponderance of primal colors in the flowers; the proportions

of the single specimen of animal life we had encountered—all led to the supposition that this was an era of earth youngness which antedated man and his works.

Well, we should soon know, if we found it possible to exist under the circumstances: science has held that man could not have survived on the globe during the earlier periods, when feroclous reptile and animal life roamed the face of the land and swam in the waters. But science was not considering man as the highly developed creature of the twentieth century. Between the ape-like thing with his stone axe and throwing stick, and ourselves, armed with powerful automatic pistols and keen knives, there was a tremendous gulf. Also, we possessed an ally of which primitive man doubtlessly knew nothing—fire—an additional safeguard on which we could count in times of peril.

One thing was certain, if we did manage to survive and sometime return to our own age—and I was not altogether hopeless of accomplishing the transition—if I were able to find some fundamentals with which to work—we would have participated in such an epic of adventure as had never been the fortune of man since tlme began. Stupendous!

My train of thought was rudely interrupted by a crashlng in the fern growth. Instantly I was wide awake and crouched by the fire, ready pistol in hand. I could see nothing, but from the direction of the clearing edge came the shuffle of stealthy pads, as of some great animal attempting to move silently. Now I could hear breathing, a slow, steady pant, loud and sustained, denoting a monstrous organism. Some great creature was approaching.

Leaning over, I lightly touched my companions. At once they sat up, blinking in the firelight, grasping their weapons.

"What is it?" whispered Dan.

"Don't know yet," I answered. "Something's prowling around the camp; acts as if it might rush us. Are those eyes shining over there to the left? Wait a minute!"

Cautiously I gathered an armful of the light, dry fronds we used for bedding and cast it on the fire. Instantly the flames leaped high, and in the glare we caught a glimpse of a vast squat shape, a horrible warty, slobbering toad-muzzle and saucer-shaped, phosphorescent eyes. The reptilian scales of the thing glittered iridescently in the firellght and on the powerfully muscled forelegs gleamed long, sharp claws. With a gesture of indescribable menace lt reared on its hind legs until it seemed to hang directly over us, glaring like a demon from the pit. Then, with a mighty snort it wheeled and crashed away into the darkness.

We drew long breaths and stared into each other's blanched faces. "Whew, but that was a beast!" exclaimed Dan. "What was it, Doc?"

"I can't say for sure, Dan, but I would judge it some type of carnivorous dinosaur, one of those mighty reptiles which science tells us peopled the earth during the Mesozoic and Tertiary periods, and which were the most terrible forms of llfe that ever existed on our globe.

"I guess that settles it," I continued, "we have evidently been shot back, Heaven alone knows how many million years, doubtlessly to a time long before man's appearance on the scene. That is, according to the contention of science that man could not have lived in conjunction with the enormous carnivorous life forms of the secondary period. It looks like we are In a position to prove or disprove the contention, for here is the dinosaur, and here are we to argue the thing out with him. We came out ahead in the first encounter, anyway.

"I very much doubt, though, that our guns will be of any use against the brutes; the life-centers of these creatures are very vague, largely located along the ganglia of the spinal cord, to be precise, and bullets would probably not slay them quickly enough to prevent their doing damage. Fire and tall trees, if there are any, will be our best bets. There is one thing in our favor: they are practically brainless, no power of reasoning whatever, and we should be able to easily outwit them. What we must guard against is coming on them suddenly, or being caught without fire after dark."

"I certainly wish I had a rifle;" growled Dan. "I believe I'd back my express against the beastie—he would have a good sporting chance, though.

"Well, I guess His Nibs has departed for parts unknown, so you chaps had better get some sleep. I'll finish my cigarette and stand guard the next trick. Go to bed, Doc."

In the morning, we discovered that the remainder of the deer's carcass had disappeared. Evidently our nocturnal visitor had carried it off wlth as much ease as a cat would a mouse. Fortunately we had placed the cooked meat near the fire; otherwise we would have been short on breakfast.

"Cave bears, sabretooth tigers, mastodons!" chortled Dan, slapping Huayan on the back. "What you say, old sobersides? Let's go hunting!"

CHAPTER VIII

The Man-ape

AFTER breakfast we set off down the valley, following the general direction of the stream, for we did not care to be far from water in this humid air; besides, there was the faint chance that we had fallen into the time of the people who built the city whose ruins were at the bottom of all this trouble.

The air was sweet with the perfume of flowers and quivered with bird cries, while butterflies, like bits of rainbow, fluttered from bloom to bloom. The heat was not the oppressive heat of the tropics of our own age and we thrilled with the zest of life. All about us towered the gigantic fern, slender pedicles, surmounted by fantastlc spore cases shooting high over all. We were constantly dlscovering new wonders of plant life, and frequent pauses to examine these made progress slow. But, as Dan remarked, we had already proven that time did not mean much, so we proceeded leisurely.

After several hours of travel, the fern began to be supplanted by gigantic flowering trees. These forest giants towered hundreds of feet and were festooned with creepers and orchid-like arboreal plants. Soon the fern growth disappeared altogether and we were passing beneath wide-spreading boughs that swept low over our heads. The interlacing branches shut out the sun's rays and a sultry twilight enveloped everything. The birds had disappeared, but their cries floated eerily down from the vast helghts of the upper growth, accentuating the hush that surrounded us. There was also a change in the flowers: the varicolored blooms had vanished; here were only the primal yellow and white blossoms.

We felt more secure here with easily accessible branches that would furnish a safe refuge from the giant reptiles, should we chance to suddenly run across a day prowling specimen; and it was due to this feeling of security that tragedy very nearly overtook us in these dim, cloistered aisles.

While amid the fern, we had kept together for mutual protection, but here we spread out more, each examining that which happened to attract his Interest. I had lagged quite a little ways behind and was stooping over a curious specimen of algae when I heard a slight rustling in the growth above. Instinctively I

straightened, just as two great gnarled hands gripped my head and face. It was the movement of springing erect that saved my life; for the hands missed the throat grip that would have choked the life out of me before I could have uttered a sound. As it was, my head was twisted around on my shoulders and my neck was in danger of being broken. Frantically I tore at the clutching hands, but my strength, far greater than that of the average man, was as nothing. With a last despairing effort, I freed my mouth enough to gasp out a strangling cry. Before my eyes was a film of rosy bubbling mist, in my ears a thunderous roaring; I felt myself raised from the ground and into the branches of the great tree that sheltered my assailant. Faintly I heard the crack of a pistol; the grip on my head loosed and I dropped heavily to the ground. Over me catapulted a gigantic hairy figure to lay with outstretched arms and legs twitching in death throes. Dizzily I sat up, my neck feeling as if it would never again be straight.

Dan and Huayan were rushing toward me, smoking pistols in their hands.

"Are you all right, Doc?" exclaimed the former. "Lord, I thought you were a goner! Your head was twisted clear around."

The Chief said nothing but his strong fingers massaged the bruised muscles of my neck with a touch as gentle as a woman's. In a few minutes I was able to move my head without pain, and barring a slight stiffness, appeared none the worse for the adventure.

"What the devil is this thing?" Dan wanted to know. "Looks like an ape and looks like a man. We both hit him, Huayan; here's a hole between his eyes and another in his chest: guess this is one varmint that can't stand up against a gun."

As Dan said, the thing pertained to both man and ape: the forehead was low and receding, the jaw very pronounced; but the teeth were even and rather small, not in the least like those of an ape. The face was almost free of hair and was whitish and pimply. The arms were abnormally long, the hands gnarled and extremely muscular, the feet plainly prehensile. The heavily paunched trunk and the short, bowed legs were covered with a growth of fine, grayish hair. The creature had no tail. Its stealthy attack gave proof of intelligence of a sort.

We kept a sharp lookout after this, but it appeared that the creature was a lone specimen, for we observed no trace of others.

All the long, sultry day we toiled through the dim, cathedral-like passages. Far above the gorgeous birds shrieked and called—they never sang—while at times one would flash like a cluster of jewels between the flowering branches. At times, stealthy rustlings overhead would draw our gaze in quest of possible man-apes, but we saw nothing save some tiny creatures that resembled squirrels, except that their tails were long and sinuous like those of monkeys.

Late in the day the tangled jungle gave way to scattered groups of trees and clumps of undergrowth, until at last we forced our way through a final interlacing fringe and reached the edge of a wide level plain. Silently we stood and gazed, too filled with astonishment for words.

Through a flower dotted expanse the silver ribbon of the stream wound its way; to right and left, as far as the eye could reach, stretched the unbroken line of the forest, and at the far end of the valley the smoke-crowned mountain lifted its massive bulk.

But it was none of these that held our awed gaze. Glowing redly in the last rays of the setting sun, frowning, menacing, seeming to exude a vague evil, there towered a mighty rampart that marched in somber majesty across the sweep of the valley. *The wall of the ruined city!* But now, unbroken, no trace of a breach in its granite face, tremendous, radiating power. At least seven miles distant, in the clear air it seemed much nearer, and we could see what appeared to be twinkling lights along its summit; perhaps reflections from the arms of unseen watchers.

"Well," observed Dan after a long look, "things are picking up. Seems that man is in existence after all, and from the appearance of that wall, I would say that he has progressed a bit. Wonder what kind of a reception we'll get? What do you think about it, Huayan?"

"I think," answered the Chief, "that we had better seek out a place to camp, for darkness comes apace."

As I gathered wood for a fire, I pondered over the fact that since our arrival in this age, our bronzed companion had spoken almost wholly in Aimara. However, he was a master of the sacred language, and his rounded periods and stately metaphors were very beautiful. Somehow they seemed to possess a singular fitness under the circumstances, as if this was the time and place to which they rightfully belonged.

Dan fashioned a serviceable hook from a piece of stiff wire found in one of his pockets, and that evening we feasted royally on scaly ganoid fish that swarmed in the waters of the stream.

Over our pipes we discussed the day's adventures and speculated on what the morrow would bring forth. That man existed was now indisputable, and the mighty wall was indubitable evidence that he had reached a plane far above that represented by the slain man-ape, it being preposterous to think that these creatures could accomplish such an architectural feat. Science of our own age had contended that the giant reptiles had vanished long before man made his appearance on the earth. However, our adventure of the night before proved that man and the great primates were coexistent at this period of time.

Of these things and others we talked, the forest looming blackly behind us, in front the towering mass of the fire mountain blotting out the stars. The slow column of smoke rolled from the summit, touched with a faintly rosy light that rendered it plainly discernible. Dan sat gazing at the somber bulk, his eyes brooding, dream filled.

"It affects me like a presence," he mused, "a malignant presence, sinister and inconceivable, reaching out to envelop us in some dread spell. I believe the darned thing's haunted!"

"That's the Irish in you, Dan," I smiled. "By the way, doesn't that light appear to be growing brighter?

"It is getting brighter," he answered. "Perhaps the internal, or infernal, fires are going to stage an exhibition. Good Lord! Look at that!"

This last was literally shot out of him in an excess of astonishment.

From the summit of the volcano had blazed a beam of dazzling light, a snowy shaft of pulsing luminescence that cleaved the darkness like a rapier of flame, paling the very stars as it shot straight into the black vault of the heavens. All about us mourned a vast sighing, like to the susurus of the incoming tide, a shuddering whisper that shook the air, gripping the heart with icy fingers, like the rustling of unseen, haunted souls that could find no peace and sobbed their loneliness and despair. Faintly through the melancholy suspiration weaved tiny crystal harp notes, icily sweet, unspeakably sad, while the pillar of light flamed and coruscated.

Into our hearts crept a numbing dread, a feeling as of evil unspeakable that menaced not only life but the soul itself.

Slowly the mighty flare dimmed and sank, the sighing died to a sobbing breath; was gone.

Silently we sank back beside the fire, too utterly amazed for words.

"Well, Doc," said Dan, at length, "what's the explanation for that?"

"I've stopped trying to explain things," I answered. "There isn't any use. The only thing to do is take what comes and make the best of it. We will try and get into that city tomorrow; then perhaps we will gain some knowledge of this day and age—if we live long enough. Heavens above! Now what?"

From the dark wall of the forest had arisen a terrific screaming, hoarse snarls and a tremendous crashing of underbrush. Some grim tragedy of a primeval world was being enacted. For several seconds the terrible shrieks rent the air, then suddenly they ceased and could be heard only the chuckling snarl punctuated by a crushing sound, as of great bones being crunched by mighty teeth. This, too, died away and the night silence reigned again.

"I believe one of Doc's overgrown toads made a kill," murmured Dan in an awed voice. "Wonder what the natives around here do for excitement on quiet nights like this! Well, I'm going to bed! I've had enough for one day. Call me for second trick, Doc."

CHAPTER IX

Amnestar

THE great reddish sun blazed down, the mighty wall gleamed under the pouring rays and the distant line of the forest wavered mistily. Since early dawn we had been traversing the undulating plain and now were little more than a mile distant from the huge rampart which lifted its massive granite bulk across our path. We had not found the going easy, due to the riotous growth of rank grasses that at times reached to our shoulders. Also, in places we had found the ground decidedly marshy. Now the character of the soil was changing: the grass had almost disappeared, giving place to moist clay, literally covered with great two-toed tracks which I recognized as the imprints of some form of dinosaur. This did not add to our peace of mind, for should we meet one of the great reptiles, here in this open space, we would be hard put to it to defend ourselves.

Closer and closer loomed the wall. We could now see the lines of a mighty gate set between cyclopean pillars. Upon the flat top of the wall, figures were running excitedly about. Evidently our advance had been noted. Suddenly the massive gates swung back and from the opening dashed a troup of monstrous, grotesque shapes.

Larger than the largest elephant, their gait was a series of gigantic bounds. As they swept down upon us, we saw that they were using only their powerful hind limbs for purposes of locomotion, their short forepaws being held clear of the ground. Their heads waved gently too and fro on slender necks, their reptilian scales glittered naevosely in the sunlight and their strongly muscled forelegs were armed with knife-edged, curving claws. Truly terrifying was their appearance as they hurled themselves across the short space that separated us from the city wall.

Seated upon their backs and apparently guiding their movements were men.

"For God's sake, what are those things?" demanded Dan, drawing his automatic and crouching tensely.

"Steady, Dan," I cautioned; "They're dinosaurs—the great herbiverous dinosaur, Iguanadon, that flourished during the Tertiary period, harmless and easy to tame. It's the riders we've got to watch; but hold your gun hand. These people may prove friendly."

On came the reptiles! All at once they ceased their gigantic leaps and advanced at a leisurely walk, swaying their gentle deer-shaped heads in rhythm. At a distance of about twenty paces they halted and one slightly in advance of the others knelt, laying its head on the ground. Down the sloping neck the rider dextrously slid and advanced toward us, holding up his hand, palm outward in the universal, all-age gesture of peace.

Of about middle height, he was plainly enormously powerful, with the broad shoulders, narrow waist and flat hips of the athlete. His skin was very fair, his eyes that blue which is seen in the summer seas, his hair of the purest gold. His features were finely formed and of cameo-like regularity.

He was clothed in what appeared to be chain mail of some coppery metal which glowed redly in the sunlight. This garment hung from his shoulders in the form of a closely fitting shirt and was belted at the waist by a broad black belt. The leg coverings were of the same stuff as the shirt and swathed the feet as well. To the belt was hung a heavy short-sword and a peculiarly shaped dagger. Clasped about his throat was a necklace of glittering blue stones; his insignia of leadership, we learned.

His companions were clothed much of the same except that they wore caps of burnished metal and carried heavy spears much like the stabbing assegais of the Zulus.

Ten paces distant the golden man paused, voicing a question. Much to my astonishment, I understood the words. They were Aimara, the sacred language of the early Incas, but different. More complex in structure and in some undefinable way archaic, the language was to the Aimara with which I was familiar, as is pure Castilian Spanish to the Spanish of the Mexican peons.

"Whence come ye, strangers," spoke the deep musical voice, and what seek ye at the gates of Amnestar the holy?"

Stepping forward a pace I answered: "We come from a great and distant country, we come seeking knowledge, and we come in peace."

A smile flitted across the handsome features, those features that were so classically regular, but on which I sensed a vague, undefinable tracing of cruelty, the unconscious cruelty of the beast.

"Ye speak my language strangely," he made reply, "and your words are stranger still; but ye come to a proper place seeking knowledge when ye come to Amnestar, city of The Flame, where dwell the Lord of Life and the Lord of Death. But peace is a fleeting thing that oft departs for want of place to stand upon. Come, I, Lotha, Commander of the Guard, bid you welcome—for my part at least."

He turned and paused, the slight smile wreathing his thin lips.

"What about it?" I asked, after rapidly translating the gist of the speech for Dan. "Shall we take a chance?"

Dan stepped forward with a shrug of his broad shoulders.

"Let's go!" he exclaimed blithely. "We can't camp out here forever, and there ought to be something to eat in there, anyway. Lead away, General, on with the dance!"

This last with a twinkle of his gray eyes to the waiting warrior.

The golden man did not understand the words, but he caught the spirit of the reply and he smiled again, this time a real, friendly smile that disclosed fine white teeth.

"A man, this," he said, nodding his head approvingly.

Abruptly he strode to his strange mount, swung a-straddle the long neck and as the creature reared

erect, slid gracefully into the saddle. A word of command, the cavalcade wheeled and set out for the city at the odd shuffling walk. And in the rear, we followed.

The great gate swung open, we passed between the giant pillars that frowned on either side and the portal closed with a hollow, menacing clang.

CHAPTER X

The Lords of Life and Death

GRAY and gold was Amnestar, a forest of temples and palaces. A ruling city, isolated, powerful and evil, levying rich tribute from the wide lands beyond the mountain. The Holy of Holies of a great people. Cold and stately rose the great openings and mighty columns, while the reddish sunlight shimmered on fretted pillar and plated gold.

People lined the broad street along which we passed, all of a mold common to that in which the golden warrior was cast: yellow haired, fair of skin and blue of eye. The women were beautiful, their burnished hair bound about their heads in coronels from which flashed jewels. They wore loosely flowing robes which reached barely to their knees and on their feet were beautifully made sandals laced high about the ankles with golden laces. The arms were bare and the garments were cut very low at the neck.

"Some chickens!" whispered Dan. "Doc, this place suits me fine. Wonder where that black haired girl is; none of this bunch could hold a candle to her. Think we'll find her?"

I smiled and shook my head, but in my heart was a feeling that the sweet-faced vision of the screen was to play a great part in our lives here in this evil, beautiful city, so whitely golden in the sunlight.

The garments of the men were much the same as those worn by the women, the texture of the goods being slightly coarser and more fitted for service. White was the predominant color in the clothing of both sexes, but I noted here and there robes of a wonderful scarlet, others of blue, edged with gold.

On the faces of all I sensed that touch of latent cruelty that slightly marred the comely features of our friend, the Captain of the Guard.

I noted also that more than one pair of bright eyes glowed with a softer light as they gazed upon Dan's tall, lithe figure and handsome face. Evidently a million years or so had made little change in women.

For a short distance Lotha led the way along the broad granite thoroughfare; then the cavalcade turned into a quieter side street and in a few minutes halted before a wide, low building, set well back from the roadway. Here his strange steed knelt, obedient to some command unperceived by us, and the rider slid to the ground as before. The escort continued down the street, the unmounted brute ambling after. The Captain turned to the building and smilingly bade us enter.

Massive doors swung back at our approach and clanged behind us as we entered a long passageway that glowed with softly diffused light. I tried to ascertain the source of this peculiar light as we walked along but could not. It did not come from the walls nor from any visible aperture. It seemed to emanate from the air itself, a mellow radiance incorporated in the atmosphere. There was an uncanny feeling that this strange liminescence streamed through and through one.

For what seemed a very long way, the passage wound and turned; then it abruptly debouched into a spacious room suffused with the same golden brightness.

After the days of hardship we had recently undergone, the effect of this comfortable apartment was singularly pleasing. That it was a man's room and a soldier's was plainly apparent, but there was the homelike air that bespoke long occupancy and thoughtful care. Deep chairs were upholstered in dark leather—carefully treated dinosaur hide we learned—there were wide couches along the wall and at the lower end a table covered with a snowy cloth.

Through a door our guide conducted us to a smaller room where a pool of clear water dimpled in the soft glow. While we bathed, two attendants in the uniform of the Guard entered and deposited white robes and immaculate linen.

"Please accept the garb of my country while your own garments are being properly cared for," smiled Lotha.

We found the loosely flowing robes very comfortable, but the effect of our automatics and heavy cartridge belts was incongruous to say the least.

Lotha gazed curiously at these appurtenances but said nothing; nor did we vouchsafe any explanation for the present.

Upon entering the larger apartment, we found an appetizing meal awaiting us; to which, needless to say, we were prepared to do ample justice. There was an excellent roasted meat, which Lotha informed us was flesh of the iguanadon, vegetables much resembling sweet potatoes and peas and a variety of fruits, all strange to us but most delectable. The attendants filled our glasses from large crystal flagons which contained a sparkling drink that was refreshing and exhilarating.

"But a soldier's rough fare," said our host. "I trust you will be able to assuage your hunger. Tomorrow you shall be served as befits a guest."

We assured the Captain that there was no need for apology concerning his hospitality, and the havoc we wrought among the viands substantiated our words.

As we ate, we learned something of the city and the surrounding country. Between the metropolis and the sacred mountain to the east were cultivated lands and stretches of open forest where grazed herds of gentle herbiverous dinosaurs, which furnished food and served as beasts of burden. The fern jungle and the forest through which we had passed were seldom visited by the people of Amnestar, being infested with carnivorous dinosaurs and were the haunts of strange, deadly creatures that Lotha called *caraquas* and which I identified with the man-ape. Also, the country beyond the western cliffs was inhabited by savage, warlike tribes that at times poured into the valley and would have long since overrun the sacred city, were it not for the great wall and Lotha's strong legion of warriors. To the east of the sacred mountain was open, fertile country, where dwelt the people of Pacama, a strong and cultured nation, great in wealth and power and wisdom, governed by the "Powers" of Amnestar the Holy, although there was a nominal king and council who held court in the inland capital city of Quetta.

Lotha talked freely, telling us of the customs of his country, its history and traditions, and of the lands that bordered it. Quaint and curious were some of the legends of this people of the earth-youngness.

Once I asked a question concerning the great mountain to the east, but even as the Captain opened his lips to reply he blanched slightly and over his face flitted a curious expression of listening. His eyes darkened and I noticed his long white hands grip the table top. His lips moved as if in inaudible reply to a command.

"Ask me not of that, my guest," he said. "Something perhaps you shall hear anon—if the Lords so will," he finished in what was almost soliloquy. Soon after the completion of the meal, he left us with a smile and a promise for the morrow.

The attendants cleared away the remains of the feast and spread white coverings over the couches. Then they too retired and immediately the golden luminescence died to a mellow, restful twilight.

"What do you think of it, Doc?" asked Don as we lay enjoying a final smoke before going to sleep.

"Well, I'm just about past thinking at all," I answered. "Things are coming altogether too fast. One thing's sure; there is something wrong with this place; I can feel it."

"I wonder what our yellow-headed friend meant by that crack about the Lords?" pondered the engineer. "Did you notice his queer listening attitude just before he spoke? You would almost think someone was speaking to him in tones we couldn't hear."

"I've been puzzling over that, too." I answered. "Huayan, is there anything in the traditions handed down by your people that might relate to this place?"

"Yes," replied the deep voice of the Trigullo, "there is a legend that says the ruined city, which now rests in the future, was once the home of a race of golden men great in power and wisdom, who worshipped Evil and spewed forth Evil over the earth to envelop it as do the poisonous vines of the lower jungles. And it would seem that we have fallen among those golden men.

"Aye, and there was a prophecy also, but of that I may not speak as yet; for to me it appears that a fulfillment shall take place. All things will reveal themselves in time, so let us sleep."

But just before my lids were locked in slumber it seemed to me that a Presence entered the room, stood before my couch and gazed—gazed into the innermost recesses of my mind and read what was there. I could see nothing, and as I struggled to rise, a heavy blanket of unconsciousness rolled over me and swept me into the land of nothingness.

GREAT columned halls, vast passages, merging one into another mellowly glowing with the mysterious, golden radiance, our footsteps ringing on polished slabs of granite to echo from vaulted ceilings.

Refreshed by a good night's rest, bathed and shaved, our hunger appeased by an excellent breakfast, we followed Lotha through the spacious corridors. We were clothed again in our own garments which had been carefully cleansed and repaired.

Before a blank wall of gray stone our conductor paused. He raised his hands high above his head in a peculiar gesture of salute and his lips moved, but no words came. The massive wall wavered as a windswept curtain, a misty radiance played across its dull-toned surface, and then—it was not! Just that exactly; one instant a solid granite barrier confronted us, the next there was no wall there. It did not slide away, sink into the floor nor rise. It merely ceased to be. For long seconds we stood and stared.

A mighty circular enclosure, greater far than that of the Colosseum at Rome, spread its uncolumned expanse before us. I felt giddy; it was soul-shaking; tier on tier they sloped from the circular walls to the far distant barrier—myriads of white faces, the golden-haired dwellers of the city. From the portal where we stood sloped a wedge shaped passage glitteringly floored in white.

My scalp prickled and a coldness gathered about my heart, for at the broad end of the wedge, far down the shimmering aisle, reared a mighty altar black as the heart of a storm cloud, grim, forbidding, flanked by two columns of coldly glowing flame.

Behind the altar and slightly raised above it was a dais, and here upon massive thrones sat two figures, black robed and hooded, dimly seen at that distance. But I knew—like a cold hand it gripped me—the Lord of Life and the Lord of Death!

At a gesture from Lotha we walked down the white-paved lane to the foot of the altar.

Some few paces in front of the altar stood a man, a golden man slightly taller than Lotha and of the same powerful build. He was clad in a flowing robe, girded in at the waist by a circlet of shimmering blue stones. Set on his clustering locks was a wreath of pale, waxen blossoms that glowed wanly against the yellow curls. Straight featured and beautiful was his face; but on that cameo-like countenance pride and ambition sat enthroned, and a terrible cruelty, the unthinking cruelty that marred the features of all these people. Here it was accentuated and abetted by a trace of cold calculation. Somberly he gazed upon us, and gazed, too, from the lofty dais, those dread hooded figures whose hidden eyes seemed to search our innermost thoughts and read them as a printed page.

"Whence come ye, strangers, and what seek ye?"

Like deep toned organ notes the words rolled forth.

As the accepted leader of the party I answered: "We come from a far and mighty country. We have heard of the glory of Amnestar and her wisdom, and we desire to see this glory and drink of the wisdom. We come in peace, asking only a traveler's welcome."

For some seconds the high priest meditated this reply. Then he spoke again in that deep organ-like voice.

"Are ye all giants in your country?"—I have mentioned that my companions are tall men, and I am five inches over six feet. So it was not surprising that the Pacamians, who never attained a height greater than five feet eight inches, should look upon us as giants.

"Aye," I answered, "we have many giants, some of the body, some of the mind; and their works are gigantic also."

My reply seemed to impress the golden man, for a slight frown and a thoughtful expression crossed his comely face. Then his countenance darkened and his eyes flashed as he turned to Huayan standing grave and impassive on my left.

"And how is it there is one with you whose face is the face of a *curca?*" He literally spat the word that I afterwards learned meant slave—"conquered-one-who-is-less-than-the-beasts."

Coldly the great Trigullo gazed on the white faced priest.

"*Mamaca!*" (eunuch, sexless one) he said in a tone of quiet contempt.

He was wrong, the priest of The Flame being allowed to marry, a fact to which was due a great many complications where we were concerned, but just the same his epithet was a terrible insult to the great ecclesiastic. With face grown positively livid, the priest took a half step forward, his hands closing upon the hilt of a curiously curved knife at his girdle.

Huayan stood like a statue, his arms folded across his broad chest, but never was man nearer death than was the servant of The Flame at that moment. Dan's right hand was hovering above his thigh, the fingers tense, claw-like, his whole body strained in a rigid attitude. I had seen his marvelous gun-play, and I would have given little for the golden man's chances for life—for all our chances, for that matter, as I felt assured that the death of the priest would be the signal for our own extinction.

Perhaps the hierophane sensed his danger, perhaps came a message that we could not hear; anyway, his hand dropped and he turned to the great black altar and those dread figures that sat enthroned above.

"We have heard, oh, Holy Ones!" he cried.

For long moments we stood before the altar, waiting.

The great multitude was hushed, the priest remained in his attitude of salute; the ghostly flames writhed silently and the terrible cowled figures on the dais gazed.

Then slowly the flame column upon the left sank to the floor, was blotted out, while that upon the right glowed brighter and seemed to expand. A long trembling sigh from the assembled people, the priest turned a face of baffled fury toward us, strode behind the altar and disappeared. A mist began to gather before the shrine, a mist of opalescence that grew and thickened as we watched, then rolled upward hiding the black horror and the figures on the dais.

"Come," said Lotha, "the Lord of Life has conquered—for the present at least."

CHAPTER XI

The Flower Maiden

BACK along the gently sloping aisle we strode; but now the occupants of the long terraces were not silent. Whisperings and subdued laughter greeted our ears and bright eyes gazed upon us with no enmity. The assembled people seemed well pleased with the judgment, no matter how adversely it had affected the High Priest.

"Looks like we're in good with the *hoi poloi*,* anyhow," muttered Dan as we followed our soldier to the wide door.

"Yes," I answered, "and in bad with the priests; and I think they run this country. Why did His Eminence take such a violent dislike to you, Huayan?"

"I think the inhabitants of the mountain country to the west of this valley—they of whom the Captain spoke last night—are a dark race, even as are my people," replied the Trigullo.

"That's logical, Doc," agreed Dan. "Ask the general about it."

Lotha, in a few words, verified the surmise. Aside from his greater stature, Huayan was quite like the swarthy, black-haired people of the hills, with whom the people of the city were often at war. The religious beliefs of these tribes were different from those of the Pacamians, which naturally created an added bitterness of feeling among the priestcraft.

That afternoon Lotha announced that if it be our pleasure, he would show us something of the city of Amnestar.

Truly it was wonderful, this white and gold city of The Flame. The buildings were massive but graceful, built of a red granite that took an extremely high polish and, due to some quality of the reddish sunlight, from a distance shone with a dull coppery hue that gave the impression of burnished metal. Here and there, in striking contrast, reared a temple of white marble glowing rosily. The streets were very wide, paved with great stone slabs.

Engineering problems seemed to be solved solely by means of the pulley, the roller and the inclined plane: so far as we could learn, there was no machinery, as we moderns define machinery, but I caught myself wondering if machinery was needed where was present such phenomena as the vanishing door in the Hall of Justice and the opalescent light which seeped from the air itself.

The transportation facilities of these people were crudely at variance with their imposing structures. The prevailing beasts of burden in this land were small white deer resembling, except for the discrepancy in size, those gigantic creatures of the fern forest.

The little beasts bore loads and drew queer, little two-wheeled chariots, which were easily graceful as fairy carts.

Bridges of wonderful workmanship spanned the stream that wound through the city, and on the sparkling waters floated great white birds resembling swans, but far greater than any swans I had ever seen.

And to the east, the mighty bulk of the fire mountain brooded like a spirit of evil incarnate.

Just as the last rays of the reddish sunlight were bathing the mountain and its gloomy smoke crown in bloody radiance, we drew rein before a mighty temple. It was at no great distance from the eastern wall and on the side facing the mountain was a wide portico whose roof was supported by immense black columns on which were graven in a strange, fantastic work of white and gold that marvelous sculpture, the Face in the Flame.

Silent and lonely was this vast cathedral set in the shadow of the sacred mountain; its lines were austere and beautiful, a majesty clothed it, the majesty that mantles the Holy of Holies of a people. For this was the Temple of the Flame, and here at sunset gathered the city's dwellers to do homage to their god.

I noticed that other chariots were wheeling into place behind us and that white-robed people were filling the great empty space to the left. Silently they came, golden haired, flower crowned, like players in some Bacchanalian drama.

From the interior of the temple came the sound of a wild, sweet chant, swelling to a triumphant fullness, dying to a sobbing whisper of sadness unutterable. Nearer and nearer it came; the massive, bronze doors swung open and issued gray-clad priests chanting as they walked, each bearing a wand shaped like a serpent. To left and right they streamed to form a living wall along the outer edge of the portico. Then came hierophants clad in somber black and bearing small harps whose strings gave out crystal bell notes that blended exquisitely with the voices of the singers. Followed long lines of young girls in flowing robes of deepest purple, their yellow tresses unbound and shimmering about their cameo-like faces in a mist of burnished gold. In ranks they formed behind the priests, their hands folded upon their breasts, their eyes downcast in reverence.

And then *she* came!

A swelling of crystal notes from the harps, the silvery voices of the priestesses raised in a melody of aching sweetness, and down the aisle between the line of votaries glided a swaying graceful figure clad in garments of sheerest white. The figure of a girl—and such a girl! She was taller than the golden priestesses and as alien to them as night is to day. For while the clinging, diaphanous robe revealed an exquisitely proportioned form of dazzling fairness, her eyes were great pools of black light and her hair a clouded shadow, wherein the rays of the dying sun struck ruddy flashes. Her lips were a splash of crimson against the whiteness of her face.

On her tiny, high-arched feet were golden sandals held with silvery laces that encircled slender ankles, and in the dusky curls were entwined white, waxen blossoms, like lotus in a forest lake. In her arms, pressed close to her breast as a mother would hold a child, she bore a cluster of these same flowers.

To the edge of the portico she came and stood looking out over the assembled people, a slight smile curving her sweet lips. And from that vast throng rose a shout that thundered on the silence like a pæan of demi-gods:

"Losaya! Hail to the Flower Maiden!"

Again she smiled and slightly inclined her high-held, shapely little head. Then her eyes wandered to where we stood in our fairy chariots, stunned by the beauty

* The people in general, *the many*.

of this living realization of the girl of the luminous veil. In the wide eyes shone wonder as she looked on my great form and on the dusky, commanding countenance of Huayan. Then her gaze swept to where Dan stood tall and graceful beside the Captain of the Guard. And there before the Temple of the Flame their eyes first met.

The slender hands of the Flower Girl clasped tightly the cluster of white blossoms and her slight form quivered. Then a wave of color swept over her graceful throat and petaled face. Long lashes veiled the glorious eyes and she turned hurriedly toward the towering bulk of the mountain whose summit still glowed redly, although its base was mantled in purple shadows.

Swiftly the darkness closed. The chanting and the harp-notes sounded eerily through the gathering dusk. Suddenly silence, and from the floor before the Flower Maiden sprang a column of white flame like to those fires that glowed before the black altar in the Hall of Justice. Vividly the scene was lighted up by the pale radiance: the hair of the votaries gleamed like molten gold, while the Flower Maiden appeared the very Spirit of Night. Slowly she raised her white, rounded arms and with a gesture of infinite grace let fall the waxen blossoms one by one into the shimmering column that pulsed before her.

The blooms paused in mid-air on touching the pillar, were suspended as in a jet of water. Brightly the petals glowed, shot through with veins of quivering light; then they grew misty, trembled and were gone. The column sank to the floor, the darkness leaped forward and the chanting began anew, fading into the distance as the votaries glided from the portico, dying at last in a sweet, faint thrill of bell notes.

CHAPTER XII

The Altar of the Flame

THE next few days passed uneventfully but pleasantly. We drove about the city in two fairy chariots placed at our disposal, attended a banquet in our honor and made the acquaintance of a number of dignitaries.

Sometimes Lotha accompanied us on our pilgrimages; at other times a young lieutenant, Chassa by name, who wore a perpetual smile and whose handsome face bore no traces of the latent cruelty that marred the features of the majority of this, otherwise comely, race. He and Dan became inseparable and I used to smile at these queer pals, one short and stalwart, yellow of hair and blue of eye, the other so tall and dark. Each had the engaging grin that twisted his lips quizzically and filled his eyes with little dancing lights. The way they butchered English and Aimara between them was something awful to listen to, for Dan was teaching his companion our tongue, while Chassa was perfecting the Virginian in the language of Pacama.

Dan adroitly questioned the soldier about the Flower Maiden, but he did not learn much except that she was of royal blood and very largely her own mistress, being answerable only to the Lord of Life, whoever that outlandish being might be.

There had always been a Maid of the Flowers, said Chassa. She was always chosen of royal blood, and for some reason, just what he was not certain, was always black of hair, a great rarity among these people, occurring only in the families of certain great nobles of the land, whose blood was pure, those of the race that had originally "raised this land from chaos," as he quaintly put it.

It appeared that the nation was made up of more than one people, many countries having been conquered and brought into subjection from time to time. The land to the east was a great land extending to the far off waters of a sea; I thought this land might possibly be the Atlantic of our time.

To the south was another nation, also mighty, with which the country had often made war, although peace existed at this time and had prevailed for some years. To the north and west were savage lands infested with terrible monsters and beast-like men, and of these lands the people of Pacama knew little. It was almost impossible to explore them and they were let severely alone by all except certain adventurous nobles who went there to hunt the beasts, or on queer trips of knight-errantry for the glory of their ladies, or in the accomplishment of some vow; showing that people do not change much in a million years or so and that going "a-grailing" as Mark Twain would have put it, was not confined to later days.

We learned that the power of the priests was almost absolute, and a shadow crossed the face of the young soldier as he spoke of this.

"They teach the people to be cruel," he cried vehemently. "They have corrupted the noble faith of our fathers to their own selfish ends; they are traitors.

"But it would be worth my life for this to be heard," he continued with a somewhat wry smile. "Blasphemy is punishable by death. So you see, my friends, I trust you. But even so they may hear of it—the Lords have strange powers and use them in unexpected ways. Searchers of Souls they are; they can read men's thoughts as I can read the images and the cords. And The Flame knows all."

I questioned him concerning this thing he called The Flame, but he could not tell me much. It was the deity of the priests, and through them of the people, although the worship was not strong outside the Sacred City.

There was also a far higher "God" who was acknowledged—a vast, shadowy Being who was paramount, but who took no active interest in people or their affairs, who was manifested in the earthquake and other great convulsions of nature. I shrewdly suspected that both The Flame and the Lords were really crafty members of the sacerdotal college made up to look the part.

The Flame, said Chassa, had its abode in the heart of the sacred fire-mountain, where at stated intervals it held court while sacrifices were offered to the accompaniment of fitting ceremonials. All the city's populace were required to be present at these rites, and, he said, we would shortly learn the nature of them, as we would be present at the next ceremony, which would be held very soon. More he would not tell us, saying his orders relative to this matter were very precise.

We learned that the government of the land was a sort of restricted monarchy. Nominally, the king and the council ruled the land, but the actual rulers were the priests under the Lords and The Flame. Amnestar was the real capital.

It seemed that there was some sort of rivalry between the two Lords and that they strove in some manner for the lives of those brought before them. The columns of flame were their symbols, as well as their instruments of execution; and from the actions of these columns were interpreted their decisions. For the Lords never spoke, never made any gesture, sitting dread and motionless beneath their black cowls while the high priest questioned and issued orders.

The mysterious golden light and the vanishing stone that so impressed me were closely guarded secrets of the priests, their operation known only to the initiate.

Altogether it appeared the priests were just about *"It"* in this country, which I felt boded no good for us. We evidently had them puzzled to a certain extent and

they didn't yet know just what to make of us. Also, it appeared that we had become something of popular favorites with the people, and this gave the ecclesiastics pause. It was plain they did not desire to kick up an unnecessary row. Already, as often happens among semi-civilized peoples, a whispered legend was spreading over the city, a legend that said we were those spoken of in an ancient prophecy, those who would lead the people unto peace and greatness.

This was all very well where the populace was concerned, but it is a well proven fact that religious leaders do not welcome new leaders who are liable to change the accepted order of things and perhaps shear them of a measure of their power. The coils were tightening about us and it would take some skillful maneuvering on our part to avoid becoming sacrifices or something to that devil-god who was held in such high esteem.

We found a grain of comfort in the fact that Lotha, the powerful Captain of the Guard, was our friend. He, like Chassa, secretly despised the priests and their ways. That he would say a word in our defense was certain, nor would this word be taken lightly. For like the Praetorians of Rome, the Guard was very nearly all-powerful in the city, and while Lotha was no Tigellinus* in other respects, he resembled that unworthy in that his Guardsmen would follow him to the death, regardless of the commands of the priests or anybody else.

The whole situation was uncomfortably tense, and the inaction was trying on the nerves of all of us. So we welcomed the news, when one morning the golden warrior informed us that the following night the ceremonial of The Flame would be enacted in the Temple of the Mountain and that he had orders to convey us thither to witness the justice of Amnestar.

Dan was highly elated, Chassa having whispered, his eyes dancing, that Losaya would be there. Chassa was a very irreverent young man, who worshipped no other god than the keen sword that hung by his side, in the use of which he was a master. But although he did not worship The Flame, he feared it, frankly admitting it was something he did not understand.

"It has power," he said to me, "terrible power that it uses in terrible ways. None knows whence it came, and it is not human, at least not human in the sense that we are. I think it is a being accursed."

Night had fallen and the luminous twilight enveloped the city in its aureate glow when Lotha at last appeared. The streets were silent and deserted, the bronze-shod hoofs of our little coursers ringing sharply on the flags and sending whispering echoes stealing up frowning bastion and parapet.

Straight to the eastern wall we flew, and there a mighty gate, twin to that which had admitted us to the city, opened with rattle and clang, to thunder shut after we had sped swiftly through.

Over a broad, firm roadway our course led, and now the golden radiance was left behind and only the glow of the tropic stars and a lurid reflection from the smoke cloud hovering over the crest of the peak lighted our way. On and on we raced, the somber bulk of the mountain seeming to hang over us and envelop us in its shadowy mass. Up the towering sides the roadway led until the gallant little beasts were forced to slow to a walk. At last the crisp crunch of lava needles told us we were ascending the cone of the volcano proper. Another hour and suddenly we rounded a sharp curve and drew up before a frowning, stupendous cliff. No break or opening seamed its surface; apparently it was all of the virgin rock of the mountain.

Lotha descended and stood before the grim escarpment, a tiny, lonely figure in all that vastness. Slowly he raised his arms in that strange gesture of salute which we had noted before the rock door in the Hall of Justice. A misty light played across the surface of the cliff, a shimmer of radiance and then before us was a glowing golden opening some fifty feet in height and the width of the roadway. The Captain sprang into the chariot, the steeds dashed forward and the golden glow enveloped us. Turning, I saw only a wall of blackness; the strange portal had closed.

As we sped along, I scanned the passage closely and came to the conclusion that it had been hollowed out by rushing gases from the bowels of the volcano. The floor was smooth and level, the roof lofty, veiled in shadows where the radiance dimmed, and upon the polished sides weaved strange weird carvings. Quite suddenly we debouched into an enormous chamber.

Here, in orderly rows, were numbers of chariots like our own, the little steeds contentedly munching fodder.

Across the chamber Lotha led us to another blank stone wall. Again the fleeting radiance played across the adamantine surface and again a doorway opened before us; black, velvety hangings swept majestically aside and we stood on the threshold of another hall. Astonished, we stood and stared at this, the most remarkable thing we had encountered in this land of remarkable things.

A colossal amphitheatre that dwarfed even the mighty Hall of Justice—a stupendous nave whose gleaming walls were misty in the distance, whose roof was but dimly seen even in the flooding golden radiance, an awesome chancel hollowed out within the heart of the mountain.

Within the vast enclosure was a multitude, golden-haired and flower crowned, their robes gleaming in the mellow light. It seemed to me that the entire population of the city must be here; their numbers were legion. Silently they sat on curving benches that rose tier on tier to the walls of the cloister, their gaze fixed on what was before us at the far end of a long, flower-strewn passageway between the curving tiers.

An altar before which the great sacristry of the Hall shrank to insignificance. Not black, as was the other, but of a bloody red, a red that shrieked of tragedy and dark deeds. Above this altar was a dais, and upon this dais sat those dread, hooded shapes. But this time they were not alone. Grouped around them were figures clothed in silvery robes that shimmered and scintillated like pulsing light-waves. The faces were of an unearthly beauty and white as marble, the eyes of deepest blue, wide and unwavering, and the hair of a pale silver, not the silver of age but a gleaming ash that flamed whitely in the radiance. Ethereal, disembodied they seemed, their expression rapt, unseeing. There they sat, like spirits brought to earth—the Dream-makers of the Lord of Death.

On either side of the altar soared pillars of flame, the symbols of the Lords, and before the altar was a fretted wall of white marble, the height of a tall man's waist.

All this I saw in one swift glance as we paused upon the threshold. Then we were moving slowly along the broad avenue between the tiers.

"I don't like the looks of this place, Doc," muttered Dan. "Get your gun ready."

I didn't like the looks of it either, but there was nothing to do but go ahead and trust to Providence and good luck.

Straight to the marble wall Lotha led us and then turned to the right. As we reached the barrier, I leaned over it and gazed down, down, depth upon unthinkable depth—into a pit that extended to earth-heart. Far, far below I could see what seemed to be a gigantic ser-

* Head of the Praetorian guards in Rome in the reign of Nero. He committed suicide in the reign of Otho.

pent of golden fire, a pulsing, living thing that writhed as if in torment. Up from the depths swept the sound of a sibilant hiss.

Dan swore softly and Huayan muttered something that certainly was not a prayer. Even his iron nerves were shaken by this glimpse of hell-fire.

Around the pit Lotha led us and up a flight of steps to the dais. Here we found seats on a broad divan which was already occupied by nobles and officers of the Guard, among whom we recognized our friend Chassa.

For what seemed a very long time no word was spoken. The silence was intense, broken only by a prolonged hiss that drifted up from the pit at intervals.

"The Guardian is restless," whispered Lotha. "It bodes ill."

A mighty bell-note thundered through the stillness like a flaming sword of sound. From the vast audience breathed a sigh and from the pit wafted a shuddering hiss.

The shimmering figures of the Dream-makers suddenly emerged from their posture of rapt detachment; animation lighted their pale, beautiful countenances. Rising to their feet, they began a stately, graceful dance in time to an icy-sweet rhythm of harp notes that swelled and sobbed like a paean sung by spirits of joy and sorrow. As they danced their silvery garments spread out about them in a shimmering cloud from which the golden radiance struck showers of scintillations.

As the dance continued these sparks of light grew thicker until the air of the dais seemed filled with them. The quivering points clung to each other, curdled, formed a glistening curtain, behind which the figures of the dancers were but vague, whirling shadows.

Upon this curtain pictures began to form, illusive at first, dreamy fantasms that existed and yet did not. Then they grew clear, and with their clearness came a remarkable illusion of time, space, and distance: we were gazing upon other worlds, upon unknown creations spread out in their entireties. Mighty stars rushed through the black expanses of the heavens, great suns blazed and thundered, nebulae swirled in coruscating glory, galaxies were born, existed through eternities, died and passed into the nothingness.

All this we sensed rather than saw—the stupendous epic of a creation. Back of the whirling immensities was a Something, before which all else sank to insignificance, in the face of whose terrific calm our spirits were as nothing. Somehow, I knew—this was Destiny enthroned above the stars, the Eternal, the Omnipotent.

The picture changed; gone were the rolling planets and the whirling suns. It was our own world, and yet such a world as our eyes had never looked on. Steaming seas that writhed beneath a blazing sun, seas where titanic tempests lashed the murky waters into mountains of white-maned thunder. Water, water, water! sobbing, raving, whispering; and lonely, oh, so lonely!

Change! Great oozing mud flats rising from the receding waters; vast forests of reeds that rustled in the lonely winds; lush grasses clothing the higher slopes. Higher the mud banks rose; the reeds became fronded planets that shot away heavenward; larger they grew, they multiplied, expanded; and now the steaming lands were covered with a wealth of green and studded with blooms of white and yellow. But lonely, oh, so lonely. The enormous plants sway gently in the sunlight, the turbid waters lap the muddy shores.

Something moves within the wall of green! A head appears, a monstrous lizard head. A body emerges, long, low, covered with scales that glitter like pearl in the sunlight. The thing steals to the water's edge on padded feet, and as it lowers its baleful head, another head apears from the sullen flood. Long rows of teeth flash, a mighty tail lashes the waves to foam, terrible forms rear locked in mortal combat.

The picture blurs; change, change, change! The waters have receded now, the green life is winning. And other life is here also: lizard and snake, great hairy beast and flaming-feathered bird vie with one another for the land.

A figure stealing through the underbrush, swinging lithely to the safety of overhanging branches; a hairy thing, brute misshapen—but *Man!* The Lord of all Creation is stretching forth his puny arms to grasp the young world in the pygmy gripe that shall in time encompass all.

Flitting scenes of wonder: tribes that roam the lush, green land, gnarled nomads of the swarming forests and the grass-grown plains. They grow and multiply, their wanderings are less. Rude dwellings, caves and mud-walled huts; green lodges in the tree tops; Now groups of habitations; palisades and hedges; low stone walls. The picture blurs. Mighty citadels, vast escarpments, palaces and temples, great castles crowning lonely crags; cities that teem with life. Gold, jewels, sculpture; wealth and power. Mighty pageants pass before our eyes, nations grow in greatness and power. Dust and decay: the jackal howls in the roofless palace of the king, owls nest beside the temple walls; ruin, desolation, death! New life: builders that rear the mighty walls of cities that are upon the ruins of cities that were—the Giant Pygmy feels his strength and bids defiance to nature's self. And the terrific Countenance that shadows all seems to smile a benediction of approval. Formless somethings, shadows, wraiths, vast images that beat upon the curtain with impotent hands, rushing voids, stark immensities; all are there.

"The future is not theirs to read," whispered Lotha by my side.

The veil of light points thinned and vanished, the whirling figures of the Dream-makers were stilled, the bell-notes thundered and we sank back, stunned and amazed by this pictured saga of the eternities.

Faint with distance, wreathing through the air in a delicate tracery of sound, began a sweet and languorous chant. Louder and louder it swelled; heavy hangings swung on the wall behind the dais, as through the opening moved a line of graceful figures—the priestesses of the Temple. Right and left they filed to stand in gold and purple ranks flanking the seats of the Dream-makers. Between the long lines the High Priest, Shasta, walked with stately tread, descended the broad steps to the summit of the great red altar and stood with arms raised as in benediction.

The chant swelled to a triumphant paean, the bell-notes thundered, and like the dawn-wind through the mists came the Flower Maiden, her cloud of night-black hair streaming over her snowy robe, the waxen blossoms not more white than the rounded arms that clasped them. With infinite grace she glided to the edge of the altar and stood there gazing down into the awful abyss, the white flowers pressed close to her breast.

Music of unearthly sweetness swelled and vibrated, the bell-notes pealed and the silvery voices of the priestesses rose in golden harmonies. The dark-eyed girl leaned forward and I felt Dan stiffen to iron as her slender figure poised over the terrific void.

And through it all the black-robed figures sat motionless and the ashen Dream-makers gazed with faces rapt and eyes aglow, their spirits winging away to the strange domains which they created for themselves from out their own consciousnesses.

Slowly the girl extended her arms and the waxen blossoms fell one by one into the pit. Up from the chasm shot a beam of dazzling light and from the assembled multitude burst a cry that shook the walls of the mighty cavern; a mighty paean of acclamation, of greeting, a wild exultant note that throbbed with joy and thrilled with dread.

A feeling of exultation seized me; I felt myself grow, expand, power flowed through me like an electric current, strange thoughts filled my brain, my heart beat madly. But in some remote corner of my being was a chilling dread, a premonition of evil, a warning voice that whispered all was not well.

The beam of light thickened, curdled, blinding sparks of radiance shot from it, glowing filaments of light.

Shrouded at first, but glowing clearer as the coruscating spirals drifted away, appeared in the misty flame a face. A face that was human and yet not human, that was neither man nor woman, god nor devil, a *thing!* Beautiful it was with an unearthly beauty that chilled and gladdened; and evil, evil, evil! All the dark and sinister passions of mankind were embodied in that wondrous countenance, all man's lusts and cruelties; and by its beauty they were glorified and made desirable. The body, if body it possessed, was hid in the swirl of flame-light that pulsed and writhed about the exquisite features.

The thing swayed and turned rhythmically, now facing the dais, now the tiers where thronged the multitude. Suddenly it whirled and paused motionless, its eyes fixed on Dan.

God, those eyes! Blue pools of light, the very personification of beauty. Meltingly tender they were, like the eyes of a lovely woman, but in their depths was a mockery, a chilling something that whispered of a soul that was dead.

Within the eyes grew a command, a pleading command that promised, that spoke of glad surrender. They were all woman now. Thus must the eyes of Lilith have seemed to Adam in the Garden.

Slowly the Virginian rose to his feet, while I sat as if turned to stone, utterly powerless to prevent the tragedy. The ghostly melodies swelled, took on a triumphant note as the tall figure stepped toward the altar. Sweetly the eyes smiled on him, they seemed to stretch forth lovely arms to draw him close in an embrace of heavenly love and tenderness. Step by step he advanced, crossed the altar and paused on the very verge, while I groaned in spirit and cursed the invisible chains that held me powerless.

Even as he swayed forward over the gulf, the Flower Maiden spoke, her glorious eyes swimming with tears, her white arms outstretched in a gesture of piteous appeal. Soft as the music of a golden bell the beautiful voice rang through the mists of melody:

"Choose!"

At the sound Dan started as one awakened from a dream. His eyes lost their fixed stare, and the flashing smile, I loved so well, leaped to his lips. He whirled from the thing in the pit and with one swift movement swept the slender girl into his arms.

Instantly the column of fire-mist sank, the swelling music ceased. From the people rose a swelling murmur through which the voice of the High Priest cut like a knife of sound.

"Sacrilege!" he screamed, "blasphemy! Death to the profaner of the shrine!"

In an instant Huayan and I were on our feet, pistols out. I heard the clang of Lotha's sword against its scabbard and a roar of voices from the tiers as the priest stepped forward, brandishing his curved dagger. With a swift movement Dan thrust the girl behind him, his automatic flashed forth to cover the priest. Stark tragedy hovered in the air.

With a blinding flash the column to the right of the altar flared forth in a sheet of flame, a whispering lance of light sped between Dan and the advancing priest, flashed and vanished.

As if turned to stone, Shasta halted, his eyes fixed on the hooded figure that sat motionless on the right.

"I obey," he croaked through livid lips.

Then shout upon shout rent the stillness of the amphitheatre:

"Hail to the Flower Maiden and her accepted one! Hail to Losaya!"

Once again the Lord of Life had intervened.

CHAPTER XIII

Losaya

SHYLY the Flower Maiden slipped from Dan's embrace, casting a demure, half-fearful glance at the hooded figure of the Lord of Life sitting somber and impassive as before. Only it seemed to me the robed figure bent slightly forward in a gesture of compassion. The girl appeared to see it also, for the apprehensive look left her face and she glanced proudly at Dan, as Lotha stepped forward and smilingly touched him on the arm.

"Come," said the Captain, "you shall speak more with her later."

"Yes, go with Lotha," urged the girl as Dan hesitated. "The people murmur."

The vast throng was indeed growing restless, and with another flashing smile and a whisper of words that brought the color to Losaya's cheeks, he descended and again took his place by my side.

Slowly the columns of flame sank, the bell-notes died away in silvery whisperings and the flower-crowned dwellers filed from the nave in long orderly lines. The priests and priestesses marched with stately tread through the curtained portal, the angry-faced High Minister at their head and with a glowing smile for Dan, the Flower Maid glided after like a sunbeam questing a cloud.

"Come," said Lotha, "we will refresh ourselves and rest. The dawn approaches."

Through the doorway in the rear he led us, leaving the vast temple to the hissing whisper of the Guardian and the dread majesty of the Lord of Life and the Lord of Death.

"Doc, was that thing really there?" murmured Dan to me as we walked along the broad passageway. "Or did we imagine it because of some devilish mesmerism by that crowd on the platform? It nearly had me; I couldn't do a thing but walk to it; in fact I didn't want to do anything else until Losaya spoke. She saved me from that pit of hell-fire. Isn't she a little wonder, though!"

"I saw it plain enough," I answered, "and it certainly looked alive. But it may have been only a picture thrown on the flame by our thoughts. I wish to God I really knew."

In a little rock-walled room we slept dreamlessly on wide skin-covered couches and awakened later to do full justice to a breakfast of venison, fruit and little bread cakes, fresh from the ovens and much resembling corn muffins.

Lotha and Chassa shared our meal but refused to answer any questions, saying that all would be explained and that we would see Losaya soon. Whereupon Dan groaned with impatience, as any lover of any age would do under like circumstances.

It was a shy and blushing Losaya that greeted us in the wide, softly lighted apartment to which Chassa led

us. The Flower Maid was seated on a slightly raised dais, looking in her snowy robes and gem-encrusted coronet more the queen and the priestess than ever. About her were gathered several of her golden-haired attendants, now all smiles and impish humor; not in the least like the statcly habited votaries of the night before.

This was not strange, however, for despite the abominable acts that were committed in its namc, the religion of The Flame had nothing gloomy or restraining about it. Rather it was characterized by gay, malicious mockery, a subtlc, cynical humor that looked away from rather than toward the serious things of life. Thc priests and priestesses were allowed to marry, and upon the birth of a child were relieved of all religious duties, if they so desired, reverting back to civil lifc. Nor were they restricted to their own ranks in choosing a mate, although this was customary.

As we afterward learned, long years of prccedent had established thc custom of the Flower Maiden mating with thc High Priest of the college. But she was not bound to do so; in fact her wish in this matter was inviolable law (the precedent had been broken by Losaya's mother).

Indeed, I was not long in coming to the conclusion that the religion was in thc beginning a truly noble faith and had been corrupted either by this devil-god or its followers.

Anyway, this morning Losaya was a very confused and self-conscious girl, not at all the half-divine prlestess who had proudly received the acclamations of the people the night before.

At our approach, she gracefully descended from her throne, smiling and blushing, and gave her hand to Dan as she greeted us, inquiring if we had rested well and if all possible had becn done to insure our comfort.

Then to Dan, whose eyes were devouring her:

"You may sit beside me here, if you will, and tell me how you came to this my country, and if it is your will to remain for long."

"Faith and I'll never leave it now, or at least not alone!" exclaimed the Virginian so fervently that Losaya blushed more hotly than ever.

Then, at the sound of something suspiciously like a giggle from the direction of the grouped priestesses, she drew herself up very hautily and cast an imperious glance toward the offenders, who immediately tried to appear extremely innocent and not in the least interested in the proceedings about the dais.

Dan seated himself on the low step and he and the Flower Maiden were soon oblivious to all that was going on around them.

So taking Huayan by the arm I strolled over to where Chassa, surrounded by a group of laughing priestesses, was holding forth at great length on some subject that was evidently both interesting and amusing to his audience. The maidens were slightly constrained at first, but they were women, and curious; so Huayan and I were soon besieged with questions that taxed our ingenuity to answer:

"Were the women of our land all tall and dark like ourselves?"

"Did they dress as did the women of Amnestar?"

"Could they marry as they pleased?"

"Did the men of our land take more than one wife?"

"Were our women beautiful?"

And a thousand and one things more. Most of the bombardment was directed at me, for the grave Trigullo answered briefly when at all.

Very fair were these young votaries and I will have to admit I was thoroughly enjoying myself, when suddenly there was a startled exclamation from one of the girls and a hush fell over the little group, a hush through which we plainly heard the golden voice of the Flower Maiden:

"And is not there some fair woman of your own land to whom your thoughts return at times?"—Oh, thc age-old question of a maid to a man!

Then a sardonic intonation from thc direction of the doorway, and turning, I beheld Shasta, his arrogant countenance made blacker yet by the hate and jealousy that stormed In his blue eyes.

"An audience is granted, oh, Flower Maiden," he rasped, "and you have little time in which to prepare."

"The message has alrcady been brought to me; I will not delay the Lords," answered the prlestess, her sweet voice quivering with anger she did not attempt to conceal.

The prlest bowed coldly and with a lowerlng glancc at Dan, who returned it with interest, vanished into the passageway.

"Oh, I hate him, I hate him!" exclaimed Losaya passionately. "And I fear him also: hc is wicked; he came but to spy!

"Well, perhaps the Lords will measure strength at last," shc murmured, half in soliloquy, "and the Lord of Life is powerful.

"You must leave me now, my guests," she said to us, a smile breaking the somberness of her faco like a flash of sunlight. "An audience is granted certain grcat chlefs and nobles, and custom requires me to be present."

Whereupon she extended her hand for Dan to kiss, but that impetuous young man promptly gathered the Flower Maiden into the clasp of two very capable arms and kissed Losaya where nature intended kisses to be placed. So that when at last he released her, she fled blushing and starry-eyed to a little door that evidently led to her own private boudoir, if such a word may be used in connection with these strange dwellings in the heart of a volcano.

The Captain of the Guard joined us in our own apartment and Chassa's graphic account of the happenings in the reception room brought a smile to his lips, but he frowned and looked grave when told of Shasta's coming.

"We must watch these priests," he said. "They are treacherous, and I fear that the long threatened struggle between the prlests of Amnestar and the rulers of the land will flare forth at last. The priests are strong—aye, very strong, and they have The Flame to help them, and perchance the Lord of Death. Well, we are strong also, and I think we can depend on the Lord of Life for assistance, and no small assistance at that."

"Lotha," I asked, "just what arc thc Lords? Are they not men like ourselves?"

A strange expression of indecision, a flickering shadow of troubled doubt, passed over the Captain's face, and he was silent for so long that I thought he was going to ignore the question.

"My friend, I do not know," he said at last. "As far as we have any knowledge, the Lords have always been. No man has seen their faces, no man has heard their voices. They act through the columns of light; the High Priest is their voice; the Flower Maiden attends them. We know the Lord of Life is just, can read men's souls and thoughts, can slay from afar. But seldom does he slay, and then only to protect those whose cause is just. To the Lord of Death is given those whom the Lord of Life desires not to protect; and the Lord of Death slays quickly and mercifully with the lance of light that wafts men's souls into the nothingness from which they came. The people say that the Lord of Death takes these souls unto himself, but of this I do not know. We know little of the Lord of Death or his powers, and because of this he is terrible. I know that

For an instant he stood bathed in the snowy radiance, his bones clearly visible, his body glowing like an alabaster lamp.

he favors the High Priest, Shasta; and the belief is that between the Lords is rivalry—aye, and hatred, but that a decree by One who is greater than they forbids them to harm one another. Also, there is a whisper of punishment meted out to certain high, proud spirits who angered the One, and for their sins were cast out from their high estate and doomed to abide in the world of men until their sin and the results thereof should be destroyed by one sent to fulfill an appointed destiny. However, this is but the shadowy legend of a people, and none may say it true or otherwise. Yet this I know: the Lords have power, and they are terrible."

I was greatly impressed by this bit of folk lore with its parable, which was so like the one that threads our own Christian belief.

CAPTER XIV

A Blow in the Dark

SOON Lotha departed on one of his interminable military missions, and with Chassa for a guide, we set out to explore the passages and caverns that honeycombed the mountain.

Never had I seen anything that could remotely compare with this stupendous work of nature. There were rooms in which the walls and ceilings could be but dimly seen even in the pervading golden radiance, so great were their dimensions. There were passages that flamed and sparkled as if all the precious stones in the world had been sprayed upon their walls. There were pits that must have led to the center of the earth; and in some of these we could see as it glowed that strange fire that marked the abyss that yawned before the great altar.

I began to experience a lively apprehension lest these tremendous vaults father other and greater dangers than The Flame and the two Lords. That they did was forceably impressed upon us in short order.

We were just passing from a narrow gallery into a wide cavern when black robed figures darted from a dim corridor. Knives gleamed and with a warning shout Chassa whipped out his heavy sword and struck with unbelieveable quickness. I heard the weapon crunch through flesh and bone and a piercing yell echoed through the caves.

"Back," screamed Chassa, slashing at the black demons who leaped grimly from the shadows. "Back or we die! Ye are unarmed."

He was slightly mistaken in this last. The attack had been so sudden and unexpected that for an instant we were paralyzed with astonishment, and, had it not been for the instinctive sword play of the trained warrior, we would have been cut down without a chance to strike a blow. But the brief respite was all that was necessary.

Our comrade's cry had hardly left his lips when fire streamed from the muzzle of Dan's automatic. Nor were Huayan and I much behind him. Almost as quickly as it was launched, the attack had failed. Half a dozen black robed figures strewed the floor of the passage, and the rest were in wild flight, shrieking in terror as they went. Dan sent a couple of bullets whining over their heads to speed them on their way and then turned with a grim laugh to where Chassa stood white-faced and staring, his bloody sword gripped in a shaking hand.

"What—what manner of men are you to cast flame and death from your naked hands?" he gasped.

In the excitement, Chassa had failed to note the pistols.

"We did not come to this land altogether unarmed, friend," I answered. "We have some little store of wisdom in our country. I think our enemy, the High Priest, will have something to ponder on when his assassins make their report. That is if they are indeed his hirelings."

"No doubt as to that!" exclaimed this soldier passionately. "Who else would do this thing? Who else in the land would dare to offer violence to the chosen of the Flower Maiden? This means war. Your lives are in danger, my friends, and you will need this strange power which is yours, if you are to survive. Tell me how you slew these men with flame, even as do the Lords."

We were sure we could trust Chassa, so we explained the mechanism of the pistols, cautioning him, however, not to divulge his knowledge.

The soldier readily appreciated the enhanced value of the weapons so long as they remained a mystery to our enemies and promised to say nothing.

Lotha's excitement was great when informed of what had happened, and he agreed with Chassa that an open rupture with the priests was imminent.

"However," he said, "as yet we know nothing for certain. We can only wait. Tonight there is a ceremony and the dispensing of what Shasta and his priests term justice. You will see the justice of Amnestar, my friends, and the seeing will not be pleasant; but there is no help for it, and the knowledge may prove useful at some time. I will be near you on the dais, and for your life, do nothing, no matter what may occur. The Lord of Death holds sway at this ceremony, and he is terrible in anger. After this ceremony is over, we shall see."

CHAPTER XV

The Justice of Amnestar

WHITE faces, a trembling blur of countenances. Thousands upon thousands they banked solidly, tier on tier, up to the far distant outer walls of the mighty fane. The people of Amnestar were here to witness the vengeance of their god; and the ministers of the god were here, as ever, the personification of intolerance.

In crimson now was clad the High Priest of the Temple; bands of scarlet slashed the snowy robes of the hierophants; the purple tunics of the priestesses were edged with red. The Flower Maiden alone wore stainless white. And as ever and always, those dread figures that sat motionless in their somber majesty were clothed in lifeless black.

There was a tenseness in the air, a sense of impending catastrophe, a feeling that tragedy lurked in this cloistered place with its strange columns of flame and its hissing pit that housed a something that was not of the green earth that smiled beyond these eternal walls. Death was here—death and something else, something totally different from the great Bringer of Peace.

Idly my gaze swept the vast hall, noting the symmetry of the carven walls, the mighty sweep of the doomed roof that showed dimly so far above our heads. I noted, too, that here and there great stalactites hung pendant, their corrugated columns gleaming in the light. There were many of these and they added materially to the impressiveness of the scene; they seemed so cold and lone in all this vastness, like swords of Damocles suspended over the heads of the worshippers. Instinctively I glanced up to see if we were favored by such a strikingly appropriate symbol.

There was none directly above us, but over the pit hung a mighty inverted cone that looked as if it might have been drawn from the void itself, like the stopper

from a bottle. I could not help smiling at the absurdness of the fancy; as if any machinery manipulated by human hands could lift that tremendous mass of stone and suspend it in such a manner.

The thing fascinated me, and I found myself studying its structure closely. I discovered that the mass differed in shape from its fellows: it was fashioned like an hour glass. That is, from the greatest circumference, what would have normally been the base, it curved sharply inward, adhering to the roof by a comparatively slender continuance that looked like a mere thread against the immense flare of the false base.

A curious phenomenon indeed, a freak of the riotous gases that had hollowed out this place during titanic convulsions in the dim past.

The thunderous diapason of the bell-notes recalled me from my contemplation, and I turned to the drama that was unfolding on the dais.

The Dream-makers were again weaving their weird dance; but this time with results totally different from those attending their former performance. Again the misty, opalescent screen formed, but this time there were no pictures limned thereon. Instead, there were waves and spirals of color. Flaming and billowing, the aching tinction writhed before our eyes, whirling our senses in tune with their endless gyrations.

The effect was terrible; the mind reeled under the blazing bombardment and the emotions soared to indescribable heights of reaction.

Emerald, rose, orange, turquoise and amethyst—undulating prisms stormed before our eyes, seeming to envelop our spirits and make us even as the coruscating chromatism that bathed us. Gradually the color waves grew harsher and more nerve searing: at first I had felt but a mild exhilaration, a rather pleasant intoxication of the senses as the rosy mists merged to soft greens and mauves. Came a sense of irritation, a feeling of enmity against all things, a creeping desire for vengeance upon something or someone formless as yet. The feeling became stronger as the lurid purples and livid yellows became more intense. A harsh murmur was welling from the great amphitheatre, the growling beast-note of the mob—the blood note. I tore my gaze from the swirling color-mists and glanced at my companions. Their faces were set in harsh lines, their eyes gleamed, their breath came hot and short. The expressions of the Guardsmen were the same, only more accentuated, crueler; but on the countenances of Lotha and Chassa was only cynical amusement slightly tinged with contempt: they were not under the spell of the color waves. At once the influence left me also and remained only a feeling of nausea. The priests were masks of evil and the face of Shasta was the face of a devil; but the Flower Malden was white as death, and in her eyes was anguish unspeakable.

Darker and darker grew the mist of color until it was a weaving flood of red—red of the smoke-veiled sun, red of devouring flame, red of slaughter, red of blood, blood, blood! The mutter of the people grew to a snarling roar, a savage animal growl for prey. The dancers whirled in a bloody mist, the bell-notes clanged and thundered and the vast concourse howled like wolves eager for the kill.

Suddenly the two awesome pillars of flame flared high in a burst of dazzling light. Instantly the dancers were still, the bloody color waves vanished, the bell-notes and the whining chant of the multitude were silenced. The air was tense as finely drawn wire and in the fierce white light the eyes of the votaries glared like those of hunting beasts. Dan sagged back in his chair with a trembling sigh that was almost a sob, his face curiously white and wan. The madness had left him, as it had also left Huayan.

The bell-notes thundered in one tremendous burst of roaring sound and from the portal at the rear of the dais emerged figures—stalwart priests in black robes slashed with scarlet, and in their midst three figures: a woman and two men.

The woman was very fair; her hair was the gold of the morning sunlight and her skin was dazzling white, but in her wide blue eyes was terror. She was bound with golden chains, as were her companions.

To the light-bathed summit of the altar they were dragged, their shackles were struck off and they were left alone with the High Priest whose countenance was that of an exultant demon.

In the deathly hush the words of the High Minister of The Flame pealed through the mighty hall like sounding organ notes:

"Behold, ye people of Pacama. Behold the profaners of a Shrine. Witness to the justice of Amnestar, oh, people—witness and be warned!"

A full-throated roar gave back from the multitude: "We bear witness, oh, Minister!"

"What say ye, blasphemers?" thundered the priest. "What say ye that ye should not be a sacrifice to the Holy One ye desecrate?"

The woman clung in terror to the younger man and neither spoke; but the other, a finely featured, nobly proportioned man of middle age, answered in a voice of scorn and hatred:

"What say we, false priest of a false god? This we say to you, perverter of the truth: We die, the victims of your lust and cruelty; but you, too, shall pass, your power shall be broken, here shall be broken the power of the Thing you reverence, and he who sits there in robe not so black as the sin upon his soul, here shall he—"

The pillar on the left flamed to the vaulted ceiling and from the blazing column shot a single rapier-ray of searing light. Full upon the chest it struck the speaker; for an instant he stood bathed in the snowy radiance, his bones clearly visible, his body glowing like an alabaster lamp. Then he vanished utterly and completely. Not even a heap of ashes remained; he just ceased to be.

Silence, a ghastly silence of terror, then the booming notes of the High Priest:

"Behold the justice of Amnestar, oh, ye people; behold oh, ye strangers from afar! Behold the might of the Lord of Death—behold and be afraid!"

Like an echo to the words the deathly sweet chant of the priestesses burst forth. A dreamy light-mist began rising from the pit. It grew and thickened, curdling to a silvery beam of liquid light that shot up to the great stalactite, bathing it in a ghostly radiance that revealed every pit and seam in the rock. A chiming of liquid harp notes, a whispering beat of melody that muted all about us, and appeared in the misty radiance—the Face!

Sweetly human it was, and beautiful, so beautiful. In the wondrous eyes was a wistful appeal, a longing, a promise of joys inconceivable. Full on the man and woman it gazed, and the eyes were calling, calling.

Like walkers in a dream the pair stepped forward like creatures moved by a will other than their own; and on their faces was terror, and longing. Another step—I felt Dan rise in his seat, heard Lotha's hissing whisper of warning, felt Huayan's iron grip on my arm.

"You cannot help them," breathed Chassa close behind me. "Wait, our time is not yet."

And now the fated pair were at the altar's verge, leaning over the awful chasm where swayed that terrible, beautiful thing which lured them to destruction. Forward they stepped, into the pulsing beam of light!

For an instant they paused there in the glow, then

with a terrible shriek they shot downward; and, a fearful mask, on which was portrayed all the evil, all the lusts, all the cruelty of a world, the Face sank after them. The light ray vanished, up from the depths winged a horriblc, malignant hiss, while all about us mourned a sighing whisper, a shuddering thing of woe unspeakable, through which pulsed crystal harp notes, icy sweet, piercing.

Silence; then the thundering voice of the High Priest:

"Behold the justice of Amnestar the holy! Behold the justice of The Flame!"

Trembling, sick, sweat pouring from me, I sank back in my chair, the vision of that awful mask of cruelty burncd upon my brain as if the fires from which it rose had seared it there. Dan was swearing to himself and vowing to shoot Shasta and the Lord of Death before the night was over.

"Doc, that is what they intended for me!" he rasped. "All right, Lotha, I'll be good, but this is just a little bit more than a man can be expected to stand. Did you see the look on that thing, Doc? It's the devil, that's what it is. I never did believe in one, but I do now, and that Shasta is an imp of the first water. I'll see if *he* can stop lead, yet!"

I felt much the same as did Dan, but I knew that any move on our part would be fatal not only to ourselves but to the cause which our friends of the Guard had espoused. I believed now that the Flame was a mere figment of the lmagination, called forth by those master-mesmerists, the Dream-makers; but that ray of light which the Lord of Death knew so well how to handle was something very real. There was nothing supernatural about that; it was but the application of some natural force. However, this did not in the least detract from its destructive capabilities.

Again the bell-notes thundered, and the multitude joined in a swelling, triumphant chant. Slowly the priestesses filed from the dais and in their wake swayed the Flower Maiden, her head bowed, her glorious eyes swimming with tears. One appealing, tremulous smile she cast to Dan as she reached the portal, then vanished with her attendants. Shasta followed with stately tread, his eyes glancing neither to right nor left, his face alight with a horrible satisfaction. Still chanting, the worshippers left the amphitheatre, and last of all we and the silent Guardsmen walked slowly from the dais in the wake of the ashen Dream-makers. But soundless, motionless, the black-cowled figures of the Lords sat gazing into the hellish chasm that gaped before the bloody altar.

CAPTER XVI

War

IMMEDIATELY on reaching our apartment, Lotha left us. His lieutenants went with him; only Chassa remained, and he seemed in a state of intense excitement.

"What's the matter, old man?" asked Dan. "What's in the wind?"

"Wait," was his sole reply, "we will know soon."

Very soon we did, for shortly a wrathful Lotha returned.

"Escaped!" he replied tersely to Chassa's question. "He either suspected or was informed of our plan. Instead of going to his apartments, he vanished into one of these mole burrows. It is useless to search; there are a thousand avenues of escape known only to the priests. Shasta has fled to some one of his Inland temples, there to gather his forces. He will strike soon. The Guard can hold the city, of that I am sure, but I fear for the rest of the land: our king is not a strong man, and the army has been weakened by continued peace. These warrior prlests are men and fighters, that I must say, and they hold high courage. Were it not for the Guard, Shasta would triumph with hardly a blow.

"Strange, is it not, my friends, that Shasta should have created that which may be his destruction? The Guard was fostered by him and made what it is to defend the city from the attacks of the tribes of the western mountains; and now the Guard alone stands between this ambitious priest and the dominion that he craves."

"Ah," murmured Chassa, "but Shasta erred when he requested that the younger brother of the king be made Captain of the Sacred Guard. Brothers oft are made of different stuff, and Lotha, Prince of Huatha, is not Amartes, King of Pacama."

"Would that he were!" he muttered, apparently as an afterthought.

"Na, my friends, do not speak treason against our king," answered Lotha sadly. "My poor brother is weak, I know, but he is just, or was before this devil of a priest wormed himself into his confidence.

"But come, make ready; Losaya journeyed with us to Amnestar, and she is no doubt waiting."

Through the silver beauty of the night the fairy chariots swept back to the sacred city. Losaya, snuggled in between Dan and myself, was a different Losaya from the slightly imperious lady of the mountain temple; her laughter rang in the misted stillness, and her volce was as silvery as the moonlight. She was just a very sweet and attractive woman, happy with the man she loved, and she seemed more desirable than ever. I was almost moved to envy Dan his good fortune, and told him so, much to the amusement of the Flower Maid.

"Ah, my friend," she said, "but you do not know Losaya: "I have a most terrible temper, and I talk too much, and I am very silly, and—" Here Dan stopped her lips most effectively in the fashion approved of lovers; whereupon she scolded him for his audacity and began asking numerous questions concerning his past life, hinting that he knew altogether too much about love-making to have lived as blamelessly as he protested.

All too soon we reached the golden twilight of Amnestar and left Losaya at the white-walled palace of the Flower Maiden, about which Lotha posted a strong guard.

We found that Shasta had moved with swlftness. His priests had already left the city in fleet chariots, bound for no one knew where. The officer in charge of the gates had thought nothlng of the sudden exodus, for the priests were wont to depart at all times on missions that called them to the widely separated temples of the interior.

All day long the streets resounded to the tramp of armed men: the glittering legions of the Guard thronged the squares and lined the broad summit of the wall. The gates were heavily manned, for Lotha was taking no chances on a surprise attack. His force was greatly outnumbered; there were but ten thousand of the Guard, while Shasta could put thrice that number in the field.

There were other garrisons throughout the country, and some of these would remain loyal, but others were under the influence of the priests.

Lotha considered that the real conflict would be between Shasta's priestly forces and the Guard; the crafty ecclesiastic would strike swiftly, before the people of the country were fully aroused and prepared to take sides. With the sacred city in his possession and the Guard destroyed, he would hold the whip-hand

and the people would flock to his standard, it being customary in this age as in others for the unthinking to rally to a winner.

Toward evening, scouts returned with the information that the priests of the many temples were on the move and that Shasta, with a force of several thousands, lay at the site of the great temple of Trinticola, about half a day's march from Amnestar.

This temple, Lotha explained, was in reality a great fortress, and its garrison of priests numbered more than a thousand. It was the center of a circle which comprised a number of temples so grouped as to form a widespread defense of the sacred city on the western circumference of the circle.

It seemed to me that the great wall which surrounded the city would be ample safeguard against any attack, but Lotha was not so sanguine.

"They will have engines," he said. "They will build towers that can creep close to the wall, and machines that will cast great stones in our midst. The wall is high and broad, but it can be scaled and even breached by determined men. Shasta is a determined man and his priests will follow him with fanatical zeal. We will find it no easy task to hold the city, but hold it we will. We will let Shasta break his strength against the wall; then we will crush him. That is if the Lord of Life can hold the Lord of Death and not permit him to enter the struggle. I think the Lord of Life is the stronger, but if he is not and the Black Lord lends his power to assist Shasta, none may say what will be the outcome."

This was very disturbing and that night, as I gazed at the glowing summit of the first mountain, I wondered what would be the result if the two Lords entered the combat with their devilish light rays. I felt certain that the things could annihilate an army with as little effort as the one had wafted the condemned blasphemer into the nothingness. And the question arose: could these creatures be slain by human agencies? It was preposterous to think otherwise; all the training of a life devoted to science rose to refute the possibility of their being invulnerable. But in the back of my mind was a sense of uneasiness that I could not shake off: what if there was a spirit world, or a world of beings different from ourselves, whose physical and mental equipment varied so radically from ours that they were immune to death as we understand it? The prospect was rather terrifying, especially as it appeared probable that we were to engage in conflict with one of these creatures.

Dawn disclosed a development that drove such vague conjectures to the background. The danger of the Lords was problematical, but there was nothing problematical to what the sparkling flood of morning sunlight revealed. The plain to the east glittered with the weapons and the burnished armor of a vast host that advanced steadily to within a few hundred yards of the city wall. Bugles shrilled, cymbals clashed and the army broke ranks and began to make camp.

At least thirty thousand, we estimated there were. Clouds of cavalry hovered on their flanks, their mounts the fleet little deer-steeds and the ponderous herbiverous dinosaurs that moved with such grotesque swiftness. There was no confusion; with orderly promptitude tents were erected and fires started. At the center of the infantry line rose a pavilion of purple and gold, and over it waved a white banner emblazoned with a golden device, which Lotha said was a reproduction of the Face in the Flame. Captains could be seen coming and going, and ere long the stately figure of Shasta himself, clad in flashing armor, his tawny head bare to the sunlight, appeared, and he gazed long and earnestly at the city that dared defy him. Every inch the soldier he looked, and we almost forgot his villainy in admiration of the impressive figure he made at the head of his legions.

"Doc, this alone is worth coming a million years to see," said Dan, his gray eyes flashing with excitement. "Shasta's a man, I'll say that for him. He is going to make things interesting for us, and we're going to make them interesting for him, too. I've a notion to take a shot at him for luck; it would be a little like murder, though, richly as he deserves it. Rather a long shot for a pistol, anyway, and we don't want to detract from the impressiveness of our guns by registering any misses. Perhaps I'll get a chance at him when the ball formally opens, and then I'll even up that little dance on nothing he planned for me up there in the mountain.

"Say, Doc, you look like a picture I once saw of Richard the Lion-heart as the Black Knight; that sword is as long as one of these fellows is tall."

I laughed, but felt a trifle pleased, at that. Lotha had insisted on outfitting us in the wonderful chain mail he himself wore; and the armorers had labored night and day to that end, for on account of our great height there was nothing ready made that we could wear. The smiths had taken it on themselves to provide weapons which they considered suitable, and for me had been fashioned a mighty, double-edged broadsword fully five feet in length but so perfectly balanced that in my great hands it was as easily wielded as a rapier. It appeared that at last my great strength might be put to some practical use.

Dan and Huayan were similarly accoutered, and striking figures they made in their glowing armor and glittering weapons. Our guns and cartridge belts were somewhat incongruous in this medieval setting, but were too valuable to be discarded for the sake of appearance.

CAPTER XVII

The Attack

ALL day long the camp was a scene of feverish activity: engines of warfare were assembled and elaborate preparations made for storming the walls. We could see great wooden towers growing under the hands of the builders, while catapults for casting stones and machines, which Lotha said would throw darts with great force and accuracy, appeared as if by magic along the front of the camp site. The implements for conflict of these people were strikingly similar to those used by early medieval races of our own historical age and I was intensely interested in all these preparations from a scientific point of view as well as from a more personal angle.

Engines similar to those used by the enemy were mounted on the walls and quantities of spears and missiles were placed ready to hand. The storehouses of the city were amply provisioned, so we had no fear of famine, especially as our Captain anticipated that Shasta would bend all his energies toward the capitulation of the city with the least possible delay: the warrior held that failure to immediately take Amnestar would be fatal to the plans of the High Priest, as the king would undoubtedly dispatch troops to the aid of his brother, and without the added prestige of a signal victory over the Guard, Shasta could not hope to rally sufficient reinforcements to withstand such an attack. We were in for stern fighting in the near future.

That night huge fires were lighted on the walls and the guard was doubled; but although sounds from the enemy's camp told of unceasing activity, the dark hours passed peacefully and we enjoyed a good night's rest despite the excitement under which we labored.

Dawn found us awake, however, and after a hurried breakfast, we resumed our stations on the wall. Chassa was with us and in excellent spirits. He was a born soldier and never happier than when he was in the midst of conflict or under the promise of it soon to come.

The sun had hardly cast its first reddish rays over the smoky crown of the mountain when a fierce blare of trumpets and a wild clashing of cymbals sounded from the enemy's camp; it was the signal for the attack.

Line after line of glittering soldiery formed and moved toward the wall. The great towers that frowned at regularly spaced intervals crept forward with a steady, inexorable movement that made them appear doubly menacing; the long, snaky javelin casters kept pace.

Silently the glowing lines advanced. Then the cymbals elashed again and from the ranks of the warrior-priests burst a wild and savage chant, a fieree battle song that chilled the blood; for its tones were cruel—evil.

Lotha glanced apprehensively along the line of Guardsmen who stood ready to defend the wall.

"It is the Death Song of The Flame," he whispered to me. "I fear its effect upon my men; from childhood they have been taugh to dread it."

1 followed his gaze and myself noted the evil influence of the chant over the Guardsmen. Cheeks that had been ruddy and glowing were pale; eyes that had sparkled with zest of battle were lacklustre, strong hands that had held sword and spear so firmly now trembled. It was the religious fear, as old as man himself—the fear of the unknown.

Suddenly, above the chanting of the priests, rose another song, a song carried by a heavenly-sweet baritone and a thundering bass that was like a mighty wind sweeping the mountain peaks.

Standing on a watch tower that rose high above the level of the parapet, Dan and Huayan flung this glorious challenge to the advancing host.

God! how they sang, and such a song! The words, which the Trigullo had evidently taught the Virginian at some time or other, were Aimara, and the spirits of all the red-blooded fighting men of all time seemed to live in those rolling syllables. Mighty-thewed men of the caves shook their ponderous clubs of stone and strode to meet the mammoth face to face; skin-clad giants hurled their bronze tipped spears in the face of advaneing hosts and went raving down to death, dealing destruction with their naked hands; bearded vikings leaped from their dragon-ships to crush the opposing shield-wall with axe and blade and flashing javelin; fair-haired men of the North flung themselves in wild abandon upon the iron-faeed legions of imperial Rome; gay eavaliers in scarlet clad and gold rode with song and jest to death on stricken fields, while Glory strode before, gathering the souls of men as a maiden garners roses!

I found myself pounding on the wall with the hilt of my mighty sword and roaring out a measure in time with the beat of the swelling rhythm. All about me men were singing, wordless refrains, improvised chants of defiance, swinging pæans of victories to be. Eyes that the moment before had been dull and fear filled now glowed with the light of battle, color flamed in pallid cheeks, sinewy hands brandished weapons and shook them in the faee of the oncoming eohorts.

The long lines of the attaekers wavered, took on a ragged appearanee, their step had lost the eonfident swing; they seemed hesitant. The priests had ceased their chanting and captains could be seen hurrying along the ranks, ordering them anew, laboring to restore the lost confidence.

"They have saved us," exulted Lotha. "Shasta has lost; the attack will fail and after he has exhausted himself on our defenses, we will sally forth and erush him.

"Strange how small a thing the fate of a nation hinges on: without their song our men would have gone down to defeat, slain by their own nameless fears. Now they would dare the Lord of Death himself and hurl their challenge to The Flame!

"It will be a battle, though: see, the eatapults are going to try a flight of stones."

The Captain was right: the great engines crashed and ponderous missiles hurtled through the air; but the range was great and only a few reached the wall, doing no damage.

Onward pressed the glittering lines; now the easting machines were at work and spears began to whistle through the air. Our men lay close behind the protecting embrasures and the first volleys of javelins failed to find a mark. Our own engines went into action and eheers went up as a number of men in the front ranks of the attackers fell and a catapult on one of the enemy's towers was knoeked to pieces by a huge stone.

But by this time the towers all along the line had crept up within range and we began to suffer from the bombardment. Stones crashed against the parapet, breaching it in places, while darts found their marks and the air resounded with yells of pain and rage mingled with the crash and thud of the projectiles in a devilish pandemonium. The towers were very close now, and although several had been destroyed by our catapults, there was still an alarming number of them, their catapults thudding, their platforms swarming with men who cast spears and stood in readiness to fling bridges upon the wall as soon as the distance was not too great. Lotha was fully aware of the danger and had ordered his forces accordingly. Under cover of the parapet, which had admirably withstood the battering of the catapults, men concentrated where the towers would reach the barrier, and everything was in readiness to give the besiegers a warm welcome when they boarded us. Dan, Huayan and I were grouped where the royal standard flew and Lotha stood giving orders to his picked lieutenants who dared death to carry them to all parts of the line of defense.

We had not up to this time used our side arms, our Captain advising that they be saved for a dire emergency, should one arise, when their telling effect might be of the greatest importance. A wise strategist was this golden-haired leader, one who was fully aware of the psychological value of surprise, and prepared to make capital of anything that might offer.

Things were beginning to get very warm on the wall; stones and javelins whizzed by in storms, altogether too many finding marks. A man on my immediate left dropped, screaming horribly, a six-foot javelin driven through the lower part of his chest; a stone shattered the erest of the parapet near by and showered us with small fragments that did no real damage but were not pleasant. The towers crept forward in spite of the stones and javelins with which we peppered them. Almost before we realized it, a score of bridges crashed upon the summit of the embrasure and we found ourselves engaged in desperate, hand-to-hand struggle with a raging swarm of wild-eyed, golden-haired priests who poured on the wall in spite of our efforts to east off the gangways and stem the flood of warriors that rolled down them.

It was fierce and bloody work; the priests fought with the mad abandon of fanatics and the Guardsmen with the courage of desperation. No quarter was asked or given: it was death to the fallen and red slaughter for the living. We cast them over the parapet to fall

crushed and broken on the ground fifty feet below; we beat them down with sword and axe; we pierced them with stabbing spears—but still they came. Their captains led them, urging them on with fierce cries and wild, weird chants; where one fell, two leaped forward to take his place. All along the line the conflict raged; more towers gained the wall and new legions flung down to meet our reserves who poured from the protecting guard stations to beat them back. To and fro across the thirty-foot width of summit the battle raged; now we drove them to the verge of the parapet; now we were forced almost to the unprotected inner edge of the wall. It began to look as if we would be swept over to destruction and the city would fall.

During all the swirl and storm of fighting I had watched sharply for the stalwart form of the treacherous High Priest: I desired nothing better than to test his vaunted strength and skill in single combat and see if he could stand before the sweep of the mighty sword that leveled opposing warriors like grain before the reaper. I am not a skilled swordsman, but I am quick for a big man and my strength is such that the armor and opposing blades of the comparatively slight Pacamians were as nothing before it. I left a red trail of slaughter behind me as I raged across the summit. Dan and Huayan were also taking heavy toll, the one a cool, crafty swordsman who knew every trick of the trade, the other a savage demon gone berserk with lust of conflict. Through it all I somehow felt that Shasta was my particular prey, and I fought with this one object in view: to come to grips with the villain who was responsible for all this needless killing.

All of a sudden I saw him. Down the landing bridge of a great tower he swept, his rich armor gleaming in the sunlight, his mighty blade cleaving a path before him as he leaped to the wall, his thundering organ voice pealing out encouragement to his men. With a shout, I started for the spot, Dan and Huayan close behind me.

Slashing, stabbing, parrying, our weapons mowing a swath, we ripped our way through the seething mass, our goal the parapet edge where Shasta towered booming to his followers and urging them to drive the Guardsmen from the wall.

The priests interpreted our intentions and the pick of their warriors thronged to oppose us. A forest of swords ringed the stand of the leader and try as we would, we could not break their defense. Man after man fell before our onslaught; our blades were red from point to hilt; but still others swarmed to take the place of the fallen. My arm grew weary with constant effort, my golden armor was slashed and dinted, I was bleeding from half a dozen minor wounds; and still those yellow-haired demons leaped to meet my swinging blade. A swirl of fierce fighting in our rear prevented Lotha from sending reinforcements to assist us and we were gradually being hemmed in on all sides by blood-mad priests who were willing to dare almost certain death to come to grips with us. A booming note from the High Priest, an answering yell from his warriors, and came a rush that swept us back by its very weight of numbers. I stumbled over the body of a dead priest, slipped in a pool of blood and in an instant was down with a dozen frantic swordsmen hacking at me. I flung up my blade to ward off the blows, but it was beaten down; a sword grazed my forehead, bringing blood and slightly dazing me. Dimly I realized that this was the end; bloody points gleamed before my eyes.

The rattling crash of an automatic, the menace of steel whipped away and I heard cries of pain and terror.

Dashing the blood from my eyes I struggled to an elbow. Dan and Huayan were standing over me, pouring a withering fire into the faces of the priests. Bodies strewed the ground and men were fleeing madly back across the landing bridge. I dropped my sword, dragged out my gun and blazed away at the retreating forms.

This was too much. All along the line the panic spread; men fled shrieking from the wall, swamping the gangways, several of which gave way under the strain, crashing to the ground with their screaming loads. The retreat became a rout as the Guardsmen recovered from their amazement and leaped after the fleeing priests, shouting and smiting. Some of the towers pushed off and began to move slowly toward the distant camp, but many were abandoned, their occupants escaping by way of the lower doors, and these our catapults soon knocked to pieces.

Huayan helped me to my feet, wiping the blood from my face with a white handkerchief he had by some miracle managed to keep clean. Dan, after anxiously inspecting my wounds and finding them trivial, began raging at his luck and marksmanship.

"Doc, the devil or something saved him," he stormed. "Just as I pulled trigger, a soldier stumbled in front of him and took the slug, and next shot I stepped in some blood and slipped as I fired; then that gang swept him into the tower and I lost him. Of all the devilish luck and poor shooting! Is that troublemaker always going to escape?"

That Shasta had won free was certain, for shortly we perceived him at a distance, striving with voice and gesture to bring some semblance of order to his demoralized forces. Dan tried a couple of shots for luck, but the distance was too great, and the only result was to cause Shasta to move hurriedly farther from the wall.

"If I only had a rifle," growled the Virginian, "I'd settle this matter once for all. What do you say now, Lotha?" he called to the Captain of the Guard, who had just come up.

"Again you have saved us!" exclaimed the golden warrior, his blue eyes sparkling. "Shasta had all but won. I doubt if we could have driven him back without such loss as would have crippled us. Now it is he who is crippled. He has lost thousands of his best warriors and the remainder are disheartened, and fearful of the 'Flaming Death', as they name your means of slaying from afar. I doubt if he will try again, and our reinforcements should come soon. We may even stage a counter-attack, although our losses have been heavy. Now, what is this excitement approaching, I wonder?"

From the broad avenue that ran through the city to the western gate came the sound of shouting and we could see a troop of mounted Guardsmen approaching.

"They are from the garrison at the western gate," exclaimed the Captain in an anxious voice. "I wonder, can disaster have overtaken us there? Ah, one wears the uniform of the king's own guard; it is a courier who has circled Shasta's camp and entered the city. Now we shall hear some news."

We did, much more startling than any of us expected, the Captain especially.

To the inside doorway of the gate tower the little cavalcade swept with clashing hooves. Hurriedly they dismounted; the countersign was given, the warriors filed in and shortly emerged upon the summit of the wall.

Straight to where we stood, they came, a stalwart figure accoutered somewhat differently from our own troops, in the lead. His armor was covered with dust, his face sweat streaked; but his bearing was high and noble, and I noted that around his neck he wore the circlet of blue stones that was always the insignia of high rank. A pace distant, the warrior dropped to one

knec and raised a hand in customary royal salute.

"Hail to Lotha, King of Pacama!" he shouted in a deep voice that carried far along the wall.

A look of astonishment spread over the facc of the Captain of the Guard, a look tinged with misgiving; his officers edged nearer, their faces alight with eagerness.

"What means this, *arnasta*, why address me in a manner due only to my brother?" he inquired sternly.

"Sire," answered the officer, "yestermorn your brother, the king that was, died by an assassin's hand, and your brother was without issue. Of the royal blood remains only Lotha of Huatha, now ruler of Pacama."

For a moment the Captain bowed his head, and when he raiscd it, his eyes were wet and on his face was sadness, but a new dignity clothed him and he looked every inch a king.

"My poor brothcr," he said in a low voice, "that you should meet death in such a manner!

"Thls is Shasta's work," he continued in fierce tones. "Death shall be his portion; I shall show no mercy. Tomorrow we marcli against this villainous priest and crush him and all that are with him!"

"Aye, Lord," answered the warrior, "he dies; half an hundred thousand men march even now to aid the king. The dawn should bring their van."

CHAPTER VIII

The Lord of Life

AFTER giving orders relative to the care of the wounded and the posting of guards for the night, Lotha bade the courier accompany us and we descended to the city. As we passed along the lines of battle-stained warriors, hands flung up in the royal salute and the gray walls echoed to thunderous cheerings for the king.

Over the simple repast, with which we satisfied our ravenous hunger, we learned the details of the assassination.

Our couriers had successfully evaded Shasta's patrols and rcached the court with the news of the insurrection. Thc king had at once dispatched the Royal Guard and other troops hastily summoned, to the aid of his brother. Almost on the instant of their departure he had been struck down by a priest of The Flame who had in some manner gained admission to the royal palace.

The affair savorcd of a plot to do away with the entire royal family—the king by assassination and his brother in battle when the sacred city fell before Shasta's onslaught. The hand of the High Priest could be plainly seen: should both Lotha and his brother, the king, meet death, the country would be without a ruler of royal blood, and Shasta, who was one of the great nobles of the land in addition to his priestly office, at thc head of a victorious army and wlth Amnestar in his possession, would have found it easy to seize the reins of government and proclaim himself king by right of conquest and succession. It was a masterly scheme and bade fair to succeed, but circumstances beyond the control or understanding of the High Priest had conspired to defeat him.

The truth of the matter was, Shasta lost his head, over what has caused the downfall of greater and wiser men than this ecclesiastic—a woman. Had it not been for the insane passion of this ancient Richelieu for the Flower Maid, Losaya, and hls frenzied jealousy because of her preference for Dan, he would undoubtedly have refrained from action until his plans had fully matured and he would have been in a position to qulckly gather a far larger force than that with which he attacked us. Then his priests within the city would have struck at the same time as did his accomplices at the capital, his army would have been before the gates of Amncstar, his troops would have commanded the seat of civil government, the king and his brothcr would have been slain and the country would have fallen into the lap of the ambitious minister like a ripe plum. But bccause of a girl's dark eyes, an intricate network of plans was destroyed and an empire lost. Well, it was doubtless not the first time such a thing had happened, and certainly not the last time that it would befall some contender.

All these things I pondered that night before I fell asleep, my interest in the drama keeping me awake, tired though I was, and when at last I slumbered, it was to dream of gigantic golden priests who wore crowns and wielded death rays that were ever just grazing me with their searing beams.

We were up betimes, despite a good deal of stiffncss from minor wounds, and after breakfasting, immediately sought our position on thc wall. Here a wonderful and inspiring sight met our eyes. All was confusion in the camp of our enemles, and with good reason. For marching out of the rose and gold of the morning sunlight were rank upon rank of soldiery, their armor glinting, their weapons mirroring the rays of the reddish orb of day. Silently they came, silently, save for the creak and clang of their equipment and thc muffled thunder of their tread. They voiced no chant, no trumpets heralded their approach; grim, purposeful men they were, who had a stern duty to perform and who went sternly about it.

In the van was a grcat company mounted on the gigantic dinosaurs. Gold and crimson was their armor and equipment; the trappings of their mounts were rich and seemed to accentuate the monstrous appearance of the great reptiles that paddcd soundlessly forward, their deer-shaped heads swaying rhythmically on their slender necks.

"The Royal Guard," spoke Lotha. "Aside from my men here, who are second to none, the finest troops in the land; and there arc ten thousand of them. Shasta is between the Pit and the Altar: he is doomed. See, the captains go forward under flag of truce."

From the great purple tent moved a group of officers bearing a white banner in their midst; evidently an embassy seeking terms of surrender. But look as I would, I could not make out the stalwart form of the High Priest. Did he prefer to remaln in his tent, scorning to ask mercy of his conquerors, or had he fled, leaving his subordinates to suffer the consequence of his treachery?

Bugles rang out and the advancing host halted with a rattle and clang of equipment. Their ranks seemed legion—far as the eye could rcach extended the glcaming columns, and the signaling bugles grew faint and far with distance as the orders were relayed from battalion to battalion. Silently they stood as thc delcgation of priests approached their van. A word of command sounded, the priests halted and from the ranks of the Royal Guard rode forth a rich caparisoned officer.

A colloquy ensued, the text of which we could not hear because of the distance, but the gist of it was plain. Repeatedly the officer gestured to the tower, where floated the blue flag of the Commander of the Guard: he was delivering the ultimatum that all decisions were in the hands of the king, that on his word rested the fate of the insurgents; that surrender must be unconditional and without delay.

With a gesture of submission, the spokesman for the priests turned and raised his hand. Slowly the banner of The Flame drifted down from where it waved in

front of Shasta's tent, and the gold and scarlet insignia of Pacama soared upward in its place.

From the ranks of the soldiery who lined the wall rose a wild, exultant cheer; from the mighty army thundered back a crashing answer and fifty thousand swords flung back the morning light in royal salute to the king.

Swiftly the loyal legionaires encircled the camp, while the group of commanding officers rode sedately to where the great bronze gates flung wide and a guard of honor filed forth to welcome them to the city.

We descended from the wall and took up a station close to the entrance, Lotha slightly in advance, the officers of the Guard flanking him.

Through the wide gateway rode the glittering captains, dismounting agilely and making low obeisance.

"Hail to your Majesty!" spoke the leader in a deep voice that held hearty friendliness for a comrade, as well as respect to an honored superior. "We trust that you have not been unduly discommoded by these rascals; but," with a twinkle of his blue eyes, "if my memory serves me right, the Captain of the Sacred Guard was never averse to a friendly bickering."

"Greetings, Nanta," smiled the king. "You come in good time indeed, and we are ever glad to welcome an old comrade to Amnestar. First of all behold here my friends, the strangers from a far country, of whom you have no doubt heard some things. Were it not for them I fear your king would not be here to greet you; he would have ere now bowed before the One who is King of Kings."

Warmly did the Commander of the Royal Guard and his companions acknowledge the introduction. Although they were great nobles they were first of all soldiers who looked with high favor upon courage and brave deeds. That they had a great affection for Lotha was plain; they respected him not only for his high office but also for his sterling qualities as a warrior and a leader of the people. To these men he would ever be the commander, the staunch comrade and true friend, be his fortunes high or low.

With very little pomp or ceremony, we set out for Lotha's apartments to discuss the situation and decide on the fate of the rebels. The king was disposed to deal lenlently with them, for he considered them largely dupes of the High Priest. That that unworthy had escaped was evident, and I believe our leader was relieved; for at heart, despite his fierceness in battle, he was a kindly man and not given to vengeance.

We had almost reached our apartments, when there was a commotion in front and Chassa, the lately appointed Captain of the Guard, who had ridden ahead to make some necessary preparations for the entertainment of our guests, appeared supporting a bloody, disheveled Guardsman who reeled from weakness and wounds. The usually pleasant face of the new Captain was black as a thunder cloud and his voice shook with rage as he called to us:

"Sire, that villain, Shaster, last night entered the city by way of the small postern gate, where the stream passes under the wall, slew the guard posted at the palace of the Flower Maiden, except this man wounded sore and left for dead, and carried off Losaya, none knows whither."

For a moment consternation reigned. Dan swore luridly and his curses were more than equaled by those of the old Commander of the Royal Guard, whom, it appeared, was a kinsman to the Flower Maid and loved her dearly. He and Dan were for chasing off in immediate pursuit without giving thought as to direction, and Chassa was equally hot headed. Lotha quelled the disturbance with an imperious gesture.

"Wait, my friends," he said. "We must fight guile with guile; there is no use exhausting ourselves by aimless effort. The priest is cunning and will have covered his tracks well. Let us question this man, then look over the ground and strive to discover some clew as to where Shasta may have fled with his captive."

This advice was too excellent to be disregarded.

The wounded Guardsman could tell us little. Shortly before the dawn, he said, they had suddenly been set upon by silent men, who struck them down without warning. Just as he fell under a sword stroke he had recognized the black-browed face of Shasta among the attackers; then another blow had rendered him unconscious and when he recovered his senses day was breaking. Hastily he investigated the interior of the palace, his fears confirmed when he found the bodies of the slain female attendants of the Flower Maiden. Of Losaya there was no trace.

"I do not think he will harm her, or at least not for a while," said the king. "He really loves her and unless he is aroused to senseless cruelty by her repulsing his advances, he will hardly do her hurt. The question is, where has he taken her?"

It was then that inspiration came to me.

"Lotha," I said, "is it not reasonable to believe that he would immediately hasten to his great stronghold, where he can expect aid from his supposedly all-powerful allies, The Flame and the Lord of Death? Would he not make for the caverns of the sacred mountain?"

The king smote his thigh with a gauntleted hand and uttered a sharp exclamation.

"How stupid of me not to have thought of it at once! Of course he will go there. Chassa, order the swiftest of the chariots; we will settle this matter once for all. I had resolved to be merciful, but for this act Shasta dies. It is the king who speaks!"

Through the streets of the city we raced, a strong body of Guardsmen following close, out through the broad gateway, past the camp of the subdued priests and the great army of the king, into the wide, smooth highway that led up the flanks of the grim mountain. Dan and Huayan were in the chariot to my right, which was driven by Chassa, while I was beside the king, who was his own driver and without a peer at guiding the fleet little beasts.

From time to time I glanced to where the Virginian sat gazing ever ahead, and a little shiver would course along my spine at the expression on my friend's face. Gone was the quizzical smile and the roguish gleam that usually featured his gray eyes. The eyes were now a smoky green that glowed, as I imagine fire under ice would glow. His face was bleakly gray and spelled *—death!*

Still, in my mind persisted the feeling that the renegade High Priest was not for him, but was my own particular prey.

At splendid speed the gallant little beasts bore us up the winding road, but in our impatience it appeared a very snail's pace. Shasta had hours start; even now he should be at the caverns. What would be the fate of Losaya at the hands of the half-crazed fanatic? The thought of the powerful Lord of Life comforted me somewhat; but the memory of that devilish mask floating in the ghostly radiance of the Pit filled me with a dread foreboding. What if after all it were only a figment of the imagination, conjured up by the mesmeric minds of the Dream-makers? What if the Lord of Death was all-powerful? Would not our victory over Shasta be futile after all? Man may not contend with spirits, or creatures with the powers and attributes of spirits. The minister of The Flame might well triumph in the last. It was only in the calm face of the warrior-king beside me that I found comfort.

The sun had slanted to the west, the purple shadows had crept up the gleaming slopes of the fire mountain and now we were fleeting through the pale silver that a thin slice of moon cast wanly. Landmarks began to tell us that the entrance to the caverns was not far away.

"Aye, we are close," answered Lotha to my question. "Pray to the One that the Lord of Life be not shorn of power, for without his help I cannot raise the portal."

"What do you mean, Lotha," I asked, "what is the secret of these mysterious barriers?"

"Time agone unthinkable," answered the king, "the Lords placed the gates of frozen light at the entrances to their abodes; here at the mountain caverns, before the Hall of Justice and at other places where they choose to dwell at times. Death flies from these gates at a touch, and none can move them. Only the Lords know the secret and it is by the will of one or both of them that the door to their home is opened. Certain ones among us are given the power to commune with the Lords from afar; such a one am I. I can send my thoughts to them and they can send theirs to me when they so desire. Rarely is a message sent—one came that night, so long ago, when we talked there in my quarters —and when one comes, we must obey. I trust the Lord of Life will raise the portal when I call, but if he does not, we are helpless."

"Lotha—can the Lords die, think you?"

A flicker of indecision swept over the king's face and he was long in answering.

"I do not know," he said at last. "But this I believe: as we know death, the Lords cannot die; but they are, I think, subject to change. Their span of life is perhaps so infinitely greater than ours that we would say death is not for them. Some time, long ago, they came into being; some time, I know not when, they will pass as all things pass, to begin life anew in some unknown way. So far as we can tell they have always been, and what they are none know. It is they who teach the Dream-makers their arts, it is they who make the golden light that turns night into day, it is they, perchance, who called The Flame into being, for I think they hold power over it, and it is they who will sit in judgment at this quarrel of ours with Shasta—unless One who is greater than they sees fit to intervene.

"However, we will play our own parts as we see best," he continued with a quizzical smile, "though we be but puppets on the stage."

That Lotha was a good deal of a fatalist was plain to be seen, but he also possessed faith in his own powers.

His words had given me much to think about; my scientific axioms were tumbling about my ears, and I was more than ever impressed with how little we know of this world of ours.

However, there was little time for scientific conjecture; the portal was at hand. The king reined in the quivering steeds, and sprang to the ground to stand in an attitude of intense concentration before the ghostly gray surface of the stone, or what appeared to be stone, but was evidently something very different.

For me it was a moment of tensest suspense. Would the Lord of Life hear the call of the king, or was he subservient to the dread Lord of Death and unable to assist the enemies of the Black Lord's followers?

For what seemed a very long time the golden warrior stood before the barrier, and nothing happened. Then, just as bleak despair was creeping into my heart, the surface of the portal shimmered with a faint, silvery radiance. The wan glow pulsed, quivered, and before us was a square of golden luminescence that beat against the pale moonlight as if straining to engulf it.

The king leaped to the driver's post of our chariot, a sharp word of command to the snowy beasts and we were sweeping along the broad gallery that led to the mighty amphitheatre in which the drama was drawing swiftly to a close. Into the first great hall we charged, leaped from the vehicles and rushed to the entrance of the nave.

Again a ghostly barrier loomed before us, but this time only for an instant; it would seem that the Power within was awaiting our coming. On the threshold we paused. The great hall was empty now, but on the lofty dais sat the black-cowled Lords, and the ashen Dream-makers were there, silent, rapt, weaving their uncanny spells.

Upon the lofty altar stood two figures—Shasta and the Flower Maiden.

She stood facing him, her trim body proudly erect, her dainty head with its wondrous dusky mist of waving hair, flung proudly back; even at this distance we could see the scorn and loathing pictured on her face.

Shasta seemed to be arguing with her and appealing to the Lords for support.

Suddenly with a furious gesture he started toward her, his clutching hands outstretched, his face working with passion. Lithe and graceful as a bird on the wing, she eluded him, and as he blundered past darted to the very edge of the altar, there to stand poised on the verge of the awful pit. Plainly as words spoke her pose: rather than submit to the profanation of his hands, she would cast herself into the ghastly depths.

All this had happened in the instant that we stood hesitating at the threshold of the portal. Even as we rushed forward, as the High Priest paused uncertainly, the misty radiance gushed from the pit and there before us in all its devilish beauty flamed the Face!

In our forward stride we faltered, stunned by the uncanny appearance of the awesome, evil thing. Then with a snarling oath Dan headed for the crimson altar.

"Come on," he flung over his shoulder. "To hell with the thing! We'll settle this once for all!"

Down the long aisle we strode while the weirdly beautiful thing in the pulsing stream of light swayed and turned, the blue pools of its eyes glowing and darkling, coruscating spirals of ashen light weaving about its unearthly loveliness. I felt my heart grow chill; those eyes were calling, calling; but I shook the feeling off and followed blindly in the wake of the tall Virginian who strode steadily forward, his face a mask of hate, his cold eyes fixed on the villainous priest, who stood gazing straight toward the swaying wonder of The Flame as if awaiting some signal. Her beautiful face alight with newborn hope, Losaya poised on the verge of the crimson altar like a spirit from on high hovering over the mouth of Hell.

Nearer and nearer we drew; the tension was unbearable, my nerves were stretched to the breaking point. Dan's hand hovered claw-like over the black butt of his automatic, his eyes never leaving the form of Shasta.

We were not ten paces from the curving rail that abutted the pit when without warning the pillar of flame to the left of the altar flared high in a burst of shimmering radiance.

Crash on crash of thundering reports, slashes of gold and crimson fire, as Dan poured shot after shot straight at the black-cowled figure that sat so silently upon the left of the dais. Even as he fired the death ray hurled from the flashing pillar!

Straight before us sped the lance of light like a sword of vengeance. By inches only did the hissing stream pass us by. It jerked, wavered, then upward it shot to strike in a dazzling flare right on the base of the mighty stalactite that hung directly over the flam-

ing pit. For an instant the light played on it and we could see the veins and graining of the interior of the rock. Then the slender base vanished like mist before the sun and downward fell the gigantic mass.

Into the misty pillar of flame clove the rounded point. A crash as of the rending apart of worlds, a dazzling flare of luminosity, and before us was but a ragged shaft of splintered stone projecting from what had been the awful pit of The Flame. The Flame itself had vanished, whether destroyed or imprisoned in its terrible home, we could not know.

Again the destroying lance of light twitched and wavered; it appeared bereft of a guiding hand. In a wide arc it swept across the glittering roof of the place; then abruptly it fell—fell and centered squarely on the black-cowled figure of the Lord of Death.

The ebon robes flashed forth in dazzling blue light at the fiery touch; for an instant the Black Lord shimmered in a coruscating glory, then he vanished, utterly, as if he had never been. Like the beam of a cinematograph the death ray snapped out, the pillar to the left sank and was gone. For an instant silence reigned, then pandemonium broke loose.

Shrieking like lost souls, the ashen figures of the Dream-makers fled from the dais and with them fled trembling priests, whom we had not noticed in the excitement.

With what seemed a single bound, Dan reached the dais and as Losaya swayed up the altar steps, caught her in his arms. Lotha, Huayan and I hurriedly mounted the dais steps and the Guardsmen rushed in pursuit of the fleeing priests. For the instant we had forgotten Shasta and when we remembered him he was nowhere to be seen. Again had the wily High Priest escaped just when his capture seemed imminent. Lotha ordered a search, but there was little hope of overtaking the fugitive in these gloomy caverns, the secrets of which were so thoroughly familiar to him.

During all this tumult that silent figure on the dais had never moved. Still in that posture of eternal watching it sat, and suddenly we all swung around to face it, turned by no volition of our own. A command had come, clear and unmistakeable, to each one's brain, and each obeyed. Slowly we walked to that dread shape, walked like somnambulists, Dan and Losaya a little in advance. Directly before the throne-like seat they halted, and with one accord knelt. Paused also the king, Huayan and I, while the awe-struck Officers of the Guard grouped close behind.

The cowled figure moved slightly, then with a gesture of infinite yearning and compassion two white and graceful hands, beautiful hands, hands in which an angel might well have found pride, reached out and touched the bowed heads of the two who knelt as little children there.

And, oh, the wonder of what was there revealed! That which we called the Lord of Life was a woman—a woman wondrous fair and good we knew, just as we instinctively knew that the Lord of Death had been a man and evil. Vaguely I wondered would she lift her veil, this woman who was spirit, too, and intensely I desired that she should.

But no, only for an instant the lovely hands caressed the bowed heads of the man and maid who knelt in love before her. Then the hands drew back and Dan and Losaya rose and faced us.

The Flower Maid's eyes were misty pools of love and adoration, and upon the Virginian's handsome face was a nobility and tenderness that had not been there before. Gravely they smiled upon us, their hearts too full for words, and with us left the dais and the altar to seek the fair and lovely world beyond these gloomy caves of tragedy and death. Last through the doorway of the nave, I turned to gaze once more upon that lonely figure on the dais. I felt the smile that passed across the unseen features, and to my heart came peace. When next I looked only the shimmering surface of the mysterious portal met my glance.

CHAPTER XIX

The Endless Quest

IT was truly a joyous party that drove gaily down the mountain trail. Dan and Losaya were in that state of ecstatic bliss common to lovers of all times, while the Guardsmen were happy in the destruction of the dreaded Lord of Death and the equally feared Face in the Flame. That these mysterious creations had been destroyed completely they were confident, and by some manner of reasoning they gave us three adventurers the credit.

That Dan's shots had been largely responsible, I, too felt confident; evidently the Lord of Death, whatever he had been, was not completely immune to a bullet. He had been affected enough to cause him to lose control of the deadly ray which had been his destruction and that of The Flame as well. But I still clung to my belief that the face in the Flame had been but a vision called up by the Dream-makers, who, we had learned, were priests who led a strange, isolated existence, trained in their uncanny arts by the Lord of Death himself.

Lotha appeared happier that he had been at any time since the death of his brother and was full of plans for the reorganization of the government and the reestablishment of the noble worship of the one great God his forefathers had venerated.

"We shall need strong hands and ready minds," he said as we were grouped together beside the trail, eating of the provisions the soldiers had collected from the bountiful supplies in the great cavern, while the little beasts rested and munched their fodder in the golden light of the early dawn.

"A wise and masterful man is needed to govern this great city of Amnestar," continued the king, "one whom the king can trust and rely on, and here"—laying his hand on Dan's shoulder—"is such a one. Salute his Eminence, the Governor of the Sacred City."

The cheers that followed were all that could be desired.

"Also," went on the ruler, "Chassa, Captain of the Guard, will want a lieutenant worthy of such a leader, and you, my friend," he said to the stately Trigullo, "are that lieutenant.

"And last of all," he smiled, "the king has need of a man mighty of arm and keen of brain to stand ever at his right hand to advise and guide, one on whom he can lean in times of doubt, one who will be a pillar of strength at all times."

Whereupon he placed his hand on my shoulder and stood smiling at his cheering officers, while Losaya embarrassed me the more by flinging both her lovely arms about my neck and kissing me squarely on the lips.

"Truly, Lotha, I am unworthy of this great honor you have done me," I said when the tumult had died down somewhat, "and I will endeavor not to cause you to regret your decision; but really, my friend, I ask nothing more than to explore this great country of yours and study its wonders."

"All this you shall do," answered the king. "We will go to the great jungles that clothe the banks of the mighty river to the east and there you shall see buried beneath the green wall, cities that were old when Amnestar was yet a dream. We will slay the savage beasts of the fern forest and of the mountains to the

west and give battle to the fierce ones who live there. We will labor together to make my people great and happy, for they are your people now and you are one with us."

That night Dan and Losaya were married by a priest of the ancient faith and I was much impressed by the beauty and simplicity of the service. The people of Paeama do not believe in lengthy engagements, and I heartily approve their wisdom.

It was after bidding the happy couple good night that I walked the deserted streets of Amnestar, pondering the strange events that had occurred during the short weeks we had spent in this wonderful age. Suddenly I saw a furtive figure steal from the shadow of a great temple. As it turned I recognized Shasta. He saw me at the same instant and with a snarl of hate turned and fled along the silent street with me hotly in pursuit. Along the broad way we raced without word or outcry; I had no desire to arouse others, as I wanted this rascal for my own, and he, of course, refrained from advising other enemies of his presence.

Into the open doorway of a great building he darted; through dimly lit corridors I followed. For long minutes we sped along these ghostly aisles, then the priest dashed through an opening and I found myself in the great Hall of Justice where first we had seen the Lords. Straight for the black altar fled the priest, reached it and disappeared behind its bulk. When I was but a few paces distant he appeared again on the summit, stooped and fumbled with something, then flung erect with a diabolical cry of triumph.

With a shuddering roar there flamed at the left of the altar that awesome column of white fire which housed the death ray of the Lord of Death. For an instant I was paralyzed with amazement; then I whipped my automatic from its holster and even as the death ray leaped fired once, twice, at the snarling thing on the altar.

I saw the black hole open between his eyes and the blood spurt forth; then a blinding flare of light, a crashing, rendering sound, a falling through utter space —blackness and oblivion!

A SENSE of cold, a feeling of intolerable loneness. I opened my eyes to a flood of white light utterly unlike the ruddy radiance of Pacama or the golden glow of Amnestar's night. Above me was an arch of stainless blue from which shone a pale sun that seemed to hold no warmth.

Painfully I got to my feet and glanced about. All around were broken walls and shattered columns; through a gap I caught a glimpse of rolling forest. With cold dread clutching my heart I stumbled to the opening and gazed toward the east.

There, rearing to the azure heavens was a mighty peak whose summit glittered whitely in the morning sunlight; no plume of smoke soared above it; in lone and awful majesty it stood.

Then I knew: somehow I had been hurled through the ages again and into our own day and time. Dully I accepted the fact, my brain was numbed. Gathering my scattered faculties I set out for the wall and the wooded land beyond. Just as the evening sunlight of the second day gilded the soaring peak of the dead volcano I reached our old camping site at the mouth of the whispering gorge.

Nothing was changed; the shack was there, silent, deserted, the same as when I had left it in the marvelous manner related. Only, on the little covered porch was a twisted mass of metal—all that remained of the machine with which I had probed the secrets of the dead past.

I prepared a meal from the plentiful supply of tinned foods and ate ravenously, for I was weak with hunger. Then utterly exhausted I flung my aching body on a bunk and slept dreamlessly.

The sun was high when I awakened and as I was preparing my breakfast I heard voices. Going to the door I met my friends, the Trigullos, who were returning promptly on schedule.

They showed little surprise at the absence of Dan and their Chief, nor at my attempted explanation of what had happened to them. They seemed to think it perfectly natural that this haunted valley had claimed victims in some awesome manner. I believe the marvel to their minds was that I should be alive.

I AM lonely tonight; a year has passed since I left the grim and silent Andes that hold so well the strange secrets intrusted to their care. I have almost completed the chronicle of the strange experience that was mine among their granite desolation.

Beside me as I write stands the counterpart of the machine that hurled me back through the misty veil of time to an age when the earth was young. It glitters evilly in the soft rays of the laboratory lamps, and the reflected lights of the shining drums and wheels seem to mock me. For between me and my desire is a wall, a shadow-wall that held me back. Because I cannot as yet tell at what degree the machine must operate before I can safely make the transition from this age of ours into that other that holds all that is dear to me. Should I make the attempt without this vital knowledge I might destroy myself completely, or worse, cast myself into some period of time as remote from the age of Anmestar and Pacama as this is. I have studied and experimented, and though as yet the thing eludes me I will not despair.

But at times I wonder will I ever again in this world meet with those loyal friends with whom I trod the rose-gold paths of high adventure; will I have the opportunity of studying those entrancing mysteries that exist in that land of ruddy sunlight— the mystery of The Flame, of the Dream-makers and their weird powers; of those strange rays of light whose incredible energies hurled me through the centuries to this particular movement of time; the mystery of She whom men called the Lord of Life, whose wondrous hands haunt my dreams, whom I feel to be a woman altogether lovely and desirable.

Will these things be granted me? Only time can tell me that.

THE END